



**A
PASTOR'S**

Sketch

Human Ability



By Ichabod Spencer

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A member of my church called upon me, with manifest solicitude, in respect to a friend of his, whom he desired me to visit: a young woman, who was a stranger to me. She was a member of the church, (but not of mine), and though she was a resident in the place where I lived, she did not attend upon my ministry. I had reason to believe that she had tried it, but soon left the congregation because she disliked the preaching. She attended worship with another congregation, whose minister, as I suppose, preached many doctrines, not only *different* from those which I preached, but *contrary* to them. And I had little doubt that he would talk to inquiring sinners very differently from myself.

To visit this young woman under such circumstances was not pleasant to me. I should have to encounter her prejudices, and very likely should be obliged to contradict many things which had been taught to her; and, in such a case, it seemed to me almost beyond hope, that I should be the instrument of any good. However, she had consented to meet me, and it would be ungracious, if not unchristian, for me to refuse. I understood that a deep and painful anxiety, respecting her salvation, had troubled her for many months; and when her friend desired her to converse with me, she had consented *reluctantly*, I had no doubt. She told him she was "willing to converse with *anybody*," an expression indicative, as I thought, of no great confidence in myself, but yet it manifested an anxiety of mind.

I immediately called upon her. She was an intelligent young woman; her manners were refined, her education was excellent, and her well-trained mind was evidently accustomed to deep and extensive study. I am confident she has few equals in intellectual excellence.

She was in deep trouble. She had been a professor of religion for more than ten years, having united with the church in a distant part of the country, but for several years past she had been

convinced that she was an unconverted sinner still.

Besides possessing a mind of great strength, she appeared to me to have much firmness of character, great power of discrimination, much pride of reason, and an independence which bordered hard upon obstinacy. But I thought she was of an amiable disposition. Her frankness pleased me, and I discovered in her such a tenderness and depth of sensibility as are not common. On the whole, I was much pleased with her — I esteemed her; but I feared that her firmness and her pride of reason would not easily yield to Christ, as prophet, priest and king. She had much philosophy and no faith.

“For years,” (she said to me), “I have been fully convinced that there is *something* in religion which I know nothing about, and know not where to find it.” And as I endeavoured to point out to her, as clearly and simply as I could, the way of salvation, explaining to her the great truths of Christianity; I soon found that her opinions came into conflict with the truths which I presented to her, and she seemed wedded to her opinions with an unequalled fondness, firmness and confidence.

She evidently disliked, and very *greatly* disliked, the whole system of truth which I urged upon her attention and her acceptance; but those truths to which she seemed most opposed, and which she was ready to call in question, combat, or explain away, were such as have respect to human depravity, the dependence of a sinner on the special influences of the Holy Spirit, and justification by faith in Jesus Christ, as making atonement for our sins, delivering us from the curse of the law, and securing to us the full favour of God. But she did not appear to be so much opposed to the atonement as to the Divine sovereignty and a sinner’s dependence. She fully believed in “*human ability*.” She had not a doubt that a sinner possesses full power to come to Christ, to repent and turn to God. the idea that a sinner can do nothing of himself, which will have any saving efficacy, she could not endure. The doctrine of helpless dependence was unutterably odious to her. She said to me, as I was urging upon her heart some of the practical truths of God, “I

believe as Mr. F — believes.” We had some little argumentation upon the points whereon we differed, but I soon perceived she was so much attached to her false system, had defended it so long, and had so much pride and false philosophy embarked for its support, that no direct demonstrations addressed to the intellect would probably avail to batter it down.

But *her system had not saved her*. That was her weak point. It had not led her to peace. It had not satisfied her heart, — a heart still wanting something, and roaming, like Noah’s dove on weary wing, over a world of waters, — no rock to rest upon. So I waived all disputation, avoided theological points, (as much as I *could*, while still uttering the truths appropriate to her), and left her own wanting heart to convince her of the truth, by the pains of its own experience. I kindly assured her that there was salvation for her, a peace, and a repose, to which she was now a stranger; and encouraged her to seek the Lord with all her heart, under the direction of the Bible, and praying for the help of the Holy Spirit; for I was fully convinced that nothing but *the experience* of her own soul would correct the errors of her understanding, and lead her to believe the truths of God. If her “ability” was sufficient to repent without the aids of the Holy Spirit, I thought she had better try.

After several interviews with her, I was compelled to leave home, and I saw her no more for nearly a month. As I took my leave of her, I had little hope in her case. Evidently she was prejudiced against me, against my principles, and against all my preaching. Personally, therefore, it seemed impossible for me to have any influence over her. Her mind was filled with a system, in all its spirit, and all its influences upon personal experience in religion, entirely contrary to my religious views. She constantly heard preaching, which I thought, by her account of it, to be directly contrary to the truth which I was most desirous to impress upon her heart. I could not talk to her of seeking God, or explain to her the way of salvation, without coming into conflict with some of her darling opinions. And hence I could not expect that all I had said to her would be of much avail. Much as I esteemed

her, I was half sorry that I had ever seen her at all.

On my return home about a month afterwards, I called upon her, as she had politely requested. I found her in a very different state of mind. She was most solemn, but full of peace. Her mind was all light, her heart all joy. As she talked to me, every one of her thoughts was clear as a sunbeam. She related to me her religious exercises with so much precision, clearness, and graphic power of description, and in such sweet humility and loveliness of spirit, that I was utterly astonished: I thought I had never heard anything equal to it. On that account I asked of her the favour to write down the account she had given me,—her own religious history. She yielded to my solicitation, and a few days afterwards I received from her the following account, which I think one of the most instructive and graphic descriptions I have ever seen. I am sure the reader will join me in thanking her for allowing it to take a place in this volume.

“Dr. Spencer,

“Dear Sir — In compliance with your request, I transmit to you the following sketch of my religious history:

“Almost eleven years have elapsed since I made a profession of religion. I thought then that I was a Christian; but I made a mistake. I found out my mistake gradually. One thing was enough to teach it to me. As weeks and months passed on, I found my path, instead of being like that of the just, ‘shining more and more unto the perfect day,’ only grew darker and darker; so that I finally feared its end must be in utter darkness.

“The time, when I first thought I had begun the Christian course, was during a Revival. The teaching I then continually heard, was, ‘Give yourselves to God, and go right about serving Him,’ as if doing *that* would of itself make one a Christian. I finally concluded that must be all; the importunities of friends were pressing me, and I at last expressed my determination and readiness to begin then the service of God, believing, as I was told, that we must not wait for light, we should find it in the discharge of duty. And herein I see now how the mistake of my

life was made; my religion was one of works and not of faith. I knew nothing about faith.

“As time passed on, I became fully convinced, that there was no Christian principle at work in my heart. What then could I do? I always had a great repugnance to saying anything about my personal feelings; and if I should say I was not a Christian, and ask advice, I should only be told what I already knew, and what I heard preached every Sabbath day. I believed I might make my professed religion a religion of the heart, and there was no need of any publicity about it: as I was already a professor, why, it would make no great change in me. And I have tried to do so again and again, and wondered as often, why it was, that religion was a thing so utterly unattainable for *me*. This always made me miserable, except when I forgot it. And though I have sometimes almost forgotten it for weeks and months, still it has ever been a shadow in my heart, a secret blight upon everything.

“A few years since I spent a season in the State of Michigan, where I was under the influence and preaching of the ‘Oberlin Doctrines’ My prejudices were against them, supposing some mysterious evil, I scarcely knew what, was lurking among them. But when I began to understand those views on depravity, ability, imputation, the atonement, &c., they pleased me exceedingly. They addressed themselves to my *reason* as I thought, and commended themselves to my heart. I found something tangible to work upon; and ever since, religion, as a speculative matter, has been to me the most interesting of all things. I adopted the views of Mr. F—, with my whole heart and soul; have ever since been openly committed to that faith, and everywhere its avowed and ready advocate.

“For some two years past I have taken very special interest in Theological discussions. I resided in W—, Pennsylvania, where every one belonged to the genuine ‘*Old School.*’ The Superintendent of the Seminary, in which I was engaged as a Teacher, was a Clergyman of the Associate Reformed Church, and a large portion of the community were of that demonination. I was alone in my opinions, but openly committed to them. Last

summer the Pastor of the Presbyterian Church which I attended, formed a class among his young people to study the ‘Confession of Faith.’ I despised the book with my whole heart: but I joined the class and entered upon the work, all ready for a contest. A great deal of interest was soon awakened, not only among the members of the class, but it extended to others also. To me, finding myself alone as I was, it was a matter of most intense interest and excitement. I possessed myself of all possible aids, studied carefully, and if I found a point that baffled me, I sent it to a Reverend friend of mine, who was a disciple of Mr. F—, and in whose logic I had the utmost confidence. He allowed me to ask him as many questions as I chose, replied very fully to them all, and was ready to procure me all the means of information I desired.

“In the midst of this I was called away, all unexpectedly, suddenly, wonderfully; and I regretted it, because it put an end to my discussions, which were in prospect for the winter. I came here into a new world to me, and with work enough to occupy all my thoughts and all my time. Then I thought to myself, ‘how shall I ever become a Christian now?’ It seemed as if the most hopeful time had just passed, and now it was entirely out of the question; and I felt sad, as I thought ‘perhaps God has given me to the world to take all my portion.’ And during the first part of the winter I had little disposition as well as little time for serious thought.

“I had great difficulty in deciding what place of worship to attend. There were several things which might have induced me to attend upon your preaching, but then I thought, ‘Dr. Spencer, with his blue Calvinistic notions, I shall quarrel with him every Sabbath.’ No, I would not go there. I finally found preaching elsewhere much more congenial to my taste, and took a seat in that congregation.

“Some weeks since, I heard a sermon one Sabbath morning on human responsibility, which the clergyman brought out by dwelling very much on the god-like faculties with which we are endowed, and the obligations we are under to develop them. It

pleased me exceedingly, for that had always been one of my favourite topics, and it tended to make me feel self-reliant and strong. In the afternoon, it so happened that I attended your church, where I heard a sermon on humility. Such a *contrast of sermons* really startled me! They actually came in conflict. If the thing could have been possible, I should readily have believed that the sermon of the afternoon was meant for a reply to that of the morning. I rebelled against it with all my heart. Yet I could not help thinking that humility, after all, was most truly Christian-like, and the most eminent Christians had always expressed just such humiliating views of themselves. It would be easy to be a Christian if I only felt so; but I could *not* feel so, for I did not *believe* we were such ‘weak miserable worms,’ and altogether between the impressions of the two sermons I was exceedingly troubled.

“About that time the things of religion were continually presenting themselves to my thoughts, with an unusual power. I realized as never before how utterly unsatisfying everything earthly proved. In all the past there had been nothing substantial or enduring; the future could promise nothing, but to repeat the emptiness of the past; and the present brought only the consciousness that I was sowing the wind and feeding on ashes! That higher and worthier life I almost despaired of ever attaining, for what more could I do than I had done? any other attempt would be but a repetition of struggles, that had been just as determined as they were unavailing. Yet there remained those fearful certainties — an eternity before me, and a soul in constant peril!

“Every Sabbath day these thoughts would possess me with such a fearful power that I would be led to form resolutions and purposes, immediately and with my whole heart to make one more trial to find peace with God. Yet, in the daily duties of the week, such thoughts would in a measure be dissipated, and such purposes forgotten. On one of those solemn Sabbaths, a few weeks since, notice was given by the clergyman, that during the week evening services would be held in the church, and that Mr.

F— would preach. That seemed like a message to *me*. It brought me to a point where I felt compelled to consider if this was not the time for the final decision. I found no interest or pleasure in the present, that need allure away my thoughts; I knew no better time could come in the future. More than all this, all unexpectedly my old prophet had appeared! I certainly should have no disposition to quarrel with *him*: all my combativeness would be laid at rest. I could receive whatever *he* would say. Not an excuse was left me. God had certainly met me half way. I dared not defer the work. I felt it must be done now or never.

“I resolved to attend these meetings. I went simply to learn what I should do. Though not very much prepossessed with his manner, yet in his matter I recognized the same Mr. F—, with whom I was already so well acquainted through his writings. His sermons were very much like those revival sermons of his, which were published some years ago. His philosophy came out occasionally in an incidental way, awakening most pleasing responses in my heart. I heard him with the greatest pleasure and satisfaction. Because I dared not then neglect any means that seemed to lie in my way, I went into the inquiry meetings. It cost my pride a struggle, yet I dared not excuse myself. At the close of a conversation I had there one night with Mr. F—, he said to me, in his peculiar manner, just as he was leaving me, — ‘Give your heart to God to-night. Won’t you? Give your heart to God, before you go to bed: promise me.’

“‘I have no faith in my promises,’ said I.

“‘*What?*’

“‘I repeated the answer, ‘I have no faith in my promises.’

“‘Well, make a promise,’ said he, ‘and stick to it.’

“But I did not then think how unwittingly I was confessing, in my answer, an inability I would have denied. God was then beginning to teach me the hardest lesson I had to learn.

“I came home from that meeting in a perfect sea of troubles. I was utterly amazed to find how much my pride had suffered, in putting myself in such a new attitude. I felt mortified, humbled, broken, in the desperate conflict. And I thought within myself, ‘If

I am so proud as this, perhaps it is only the beginning of what I must come to.’

“Then, not knowing what else to do, I resolved to see a friend of mine, who was a professor of religion, confess to him I was no Christian, and find what he would tell me. This resolve was just reversing my previous determination, and cost me another severe struggle. But after I had seen him, and all the thoughts of my soul had found utterance, it relieved me. Yet still my heart almost fainted, as I found how the committal had forced me on, shutting up all retreat against me.

“That night was with me a serious counting of the cost. I had begun somewhat to realize how my pride and will must suffer; and I brought into full consideration what more I might have to do. The idea of telling my friends about my personal religious feelings, was most repugnant to me: I had always felt it an insurmountable difficulty. I *never could* do it; and I had often feared this would prove a fatal hindrance. Every thought of this kind came up before me; and then I balanced all with my eternal interests. The question was settled decisively, finally.

“My friend had expressed a very earnest wish, that I should see you, sir. Well, I was in such deep waters, I told him ‘I would talk with *anybody*.’ The next day you came to see me; and after hearing my account of myself, you told me I had been ‘going about to establish a righteousness of my own,’ and therefore I had failed to find what I needed. You told me that my reliance always had been, and still was, upon my own powers and will to work out my salvation, without God to work in me. You said, I ‘could not do it; I could do nothing of myself.’ That was the hardest of all things for me to receive. I could not understand it. I did not believe it. I told you I *knew* I had got something to do. And afterwards, when I saw you, that was the point you continually endeavoured to impress upon me, [see footnote] — that I could do nothing of myself. It seemed to me the darkest mystery in the universe. Anything on earth I would do; but here my understanding was hopelessly baffled. Yet when, two or three days after, you sailed for Savannah, I felt exceedingly

disappointed. I heard it with the greatest regret, for your kindness to me, and interest for me, had won my most sincere gratitude and affection.

“I had endeavoured to avoid touching upon theological points. I did not wish to think of them. I felt that now it was another question with me. My theology was safe, and safely put away. I had not a suspicion that it was to be interfered with. I knew well enough the wide difference of opinion betwixt you and myself, and to enter upon any discussion would be most unprofitable and vain. Besides, you seemed no more inclined to treat upon theological points than I did. So I did not happen to think until afterwards, the bow you had drawn at a venture had sent its shaft with a tremendous thrust right upon my favourite doctrine of ability. It struck the doctrine as much as it struck me. Indeed it could not hit me without hitting the doctrine, for the doctrine was directly betwixt me and the arrow of truth. But you were gone, and I was left to think of it.

“Nothing yet seemed bringing me nearer to the light. I became almost discouraged. Human helps failed me, and I found that I failed myself. *It was so.* My utmost efforts of *will* were wholly ineffectual. *I did thoroughly prove them.* Anything on earth I was willing to do. As I had told you, ‘I would die ten thousand deaths.’ And my own multiplied endeavours, — my own experiences, did finally convince me that it *was not of myself to turn to God.* And then, with some sense that I was lost forever unless He did help me, I tried to look to Him for help.

“But then came my difficulty, — *I could not find Him!* The heavens were dark, my heart was dark, and the only God I could think of was a cold abstraction of my own forming! For a long time I struggled with that difficulty, — *I could not find Him.* Finally, the thought flashed upon me, ‘*there is a God.*’ (And then I recognized a familiar principle, when knowing the solution of a question *does exist*, we are patient to follow through all dark ways to find it). ‘It is *true*, though I have not yet found Him, there is a God, — God is.’ It was like finding one spot on which I could rest. Wherever He was, *He* was the God I wanted. The idea of His

power then possessed me. That was my first *realization* of any attribute of God. And it seems to me to show the wisdom of divine teaching, that when I had been full of miserable self-reliances, and vainly seeking in myself the strength to turn to God, the first attribute of His that I realized was *His power*. It came upon me with such force and vividness, that it seemed as “if I had never before really believed there *was* a God. And then I remembered that He is ‘*mighty to save*.’ That idea came so upon me, that it seemed to fill my whole being. Such a great and glorious Saviour then He was, that human pride might well be set aside for most humble thankfulness. *Such* an one I could worship forever. So different He seemed from what had been my own miserable conceptions of a Saviour, that I would find myself questioning if there *could* be *such* a Saviour. But yet it was most true, — I *felt* it to be true, and wanted to tell it to everybody in the house; besides, the whole Bible told of One just so ‘mighty to save.’

“And then came new views, — clearer views of the atonement. I saw and felt how God himself had paid the ransom for a whole race ruined; He had himself borne the penalty; on Him was laid the iniquity of us all; it was all *done*, so that now there was nothing to *be* done, only to trust in Him to save us. It seemed such an *infinite* atonement, — so full, and it was so free; so that *every one* that thirsteth, may come, — whosoever will, may take freely. It was infinite *love* that, when extended to those so lost and guilty, became infinite mercy. There every sin might be covered and lost.

“That night I read ‘my goodness, my fortress,’ &c., and the thought struck me, is it so, then, that even a Christian has not his own goodness? — is his goodness Christ? Yes, it was so. In Him was all fullness, and *such* a fullness, then, there must be; whatever the sinner needed, whatever the sinner had not, was all found in Him. And it was such a new idea that the principle of holiness was not, after all, to be found in our own heart, but it was all in Christ, — Christ was the ‘end of the law for righteousness.’ He was our goodness, our righteousness, our sanctification, our redemption, — He alone our salvation. And when that idea fully

broke upon me, I was lost in it. The *forms*, in which I had always brought God to my mind, had dropped away, and a new God, — a Saviour, seemed to have appeared out of heaven, and filled every place around me. It was an *uncreated* glory and purity all about me, and *such* a purity, and *such* a glory, — my only expression for it was, '*such a glorious Saviour!*' The intensity and vividness of that feeling and conception, which was the most glorious of anything that ever entered my soul, passed away after a time, but I was still happy in thinking there was just such a Saviour, until I attempted to express something of my idea to my friend who first directed me to you, and then it seemed to amount to nothing more than what I had known before, — what everybody knew, that there was a God and a Saviour.

“But it was a day or two after that before I happened to think, that here was another of my favourite doctrines torn up, root and branch, — that against imputation. But so it was; I felt it was gone. I knew in my very heart that Christ’s righteousness was the only ground of acceptance. That expression, ‘making mention of his righteousness,’ struck me with peculiar force. And it came to me again and again, so full of meaning! But I did not feel a regret that my own former speculations were swept away, for the plan, as I now saw it, seemed so infinitely more glorious, that I could only rejoice in it. Not only had He paid our debt, but He clothed us also in His own robe of righteousness, that we need not depend on ourselves, or look for righteousness in ourselves, but find all in Christ. That was truly a glorious redemption.

“The vividness of these conceptions gradually dimmed, but still the truth remained. I believed everything that I had now learned, for *it was my heart’s experience*. And because I found these impressions lost their vividness, and I did not feel them moving me, but felt how great a work was to be done in my heart; I could not, dared not think my heart was really changed; and I was continually fearful of falling again upon a false hope.

“About that time, in a prayer-meeting, I heard the minister to whose congregation I belonged, make the remark, as he was giving some directions to inquirers — ‘now we are not going to

pray God to *enable* you to consecrate yourselves to Him; there is not a soul here but is able to do that.' He said it was 'just as easy, as giving away a book,' he held in his hand, 'all an act of his will.' That startled me. I *had just learned better!* I had found in my own soul, that 'it is *not* of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.' I did believe he was 'the Author and Finisher of our faith,' — even the *Author*. This boasted power of the human will, I found to be the very rock on which I had split before; so that that minister's teaching would not do for me. He had invited any who wished to see him, to meet him the next evening, and I had purposed to go; but now I would not venture.

"In the preaching of Mr. F— hitherto, his peculiar doctrines had only come out incidentally. But a few nights after this I heard a sermon from him, almost entirely devoted to his peculiar views. He went on to speak of the fall, and that 'when man had changed his heart one way, he could as well do it the other,' — to speak also of an 'imputed righteousness,' which he seemed to think was 'the same as an imputed heaven' would be, — to speak of the power of example being the strongest moral force that could be brought to bear upon the mind, and this we had in Christ. He said that motives presented would work out their effects. These were the same things that I continually dwelt upon last summer. They now swept over me like a torrent, not *convincingly*, however, for *my own heart disproved them* — but with a strange power. It was like reviving what I had just buried. Those old speculations (which my own experience had proved to be *false*), all woke up fresh, and my mind was filled with them. It was true that sermon touched a chord that was dear to me, and I was compelled to have all the struggle over again. Clouds and darkness shut down over me, and I could not see my way out! But I did not go to hear Mr. F— any more.

"By this time I began to look at my Theology in earnest, to see if anything therein was keeping me back from the light. And I finally acknowledged, that whatever the Bible said, whatever God taught, however it might come into conflict with my prejudice, *I*

must receive it. I must take it, and learn it, and believe it as a little child, my own prejudice and *reason* out of the question. If Adam's sin had anything to do with us, why I must submit. And more than all else, if God did even ordain to leave some to everlasting punishment, I had nothing to say, — it was his right. That ninth chapter of the Romans, which I had quarrelled with more than any other chapter in the Bible, and had been determined not to receive, unless it could all be explained away; why, if God had really said so, I must take it, I must take it just as it reads, for, 'who art thou that repliest against God?' And I could see now, that if it were so, it did more fully manifest the riches of his glory on the 'vessels of mercy.' His plans and purposes were none of my business. God would reign; and all I had to do was to be willing to be saved in the only way He had provided.

"But even after all this, I found myself in trouble. For some days I seemed to have come to a stopping place. I could not go back. I knew not how to go forward. All was dark, and God was far away. I knew not what hindered me, or why I was in darkness. I could think of nothing which I was not willing to give up, — nothing that I was not willing God should do with me; and yet it seemed as if something must be wanting. Unquestionably the fault was in me; my deceitful heart had hidden away a part of the price, and I could not find it.

"I was remarking this difficulty to my friend, when he suggested that I seemed to be looking to my past experiences, fearful of being again deceived, and added, that never before in my life had I had such a course of thought. That remark struck me, and when I was alone that evening it induced a long train of reflections. I had never had such a course of thought before — *that was most true.* Never, in my life, not at all before, when I expressed the hope that I was a Christian, had I experienced anything like this. Never before had eternal things come to me with such reality and power: concentrating my whole soul upon one intense, absorbing thought. And now I bethought myself of all the various processes through which my mind within a few days had past. My very power of thinking surprised me. I thought,

that while ever before I had found it difficult to fix my mind for any length of time upon my own eternal interests, now my soul's salvation had been the one thing continually before me. Engaged in my usual occupations, there was a constant under-current of thought, and when at leisure, my mind was filled with one intense, absorbing interest. Here certainly was one thing unlike what I had ever known before. In this respect I found myself a new creature. I reflected, also, that I had always revolted from telling my friends that I was not a Christian, or from expressing to them any religious concern, but now it was very different with me. I had actually surprised myself several times in thinking, with a sort of pleasure, how I would *tell* all my friends what wonderful things God had done for me. And it occurred to me now, how *unlike me* that was — how totally different from what I had always felt before. I was astonished, and said to myself, 'what has wrought this change?'

"Again, I reflected that night, I had been fully grounded and settled in a system of theology; it had been a matter of exceeding interest to me. I had believed it as fully and firmly as *reason* fully persuaded can believe. Neither had it been a mere prejudice of education. The prejudices of education and the influences under which I have always been, (except at one time for a few months), would all have led me far enough the other way; but it was a theological belief, brought about by the power of my own reason. I honestly believed, when I rested on that system, and I believe now, that no force of argument in the world could have changed me. If I had not succeeded in sustaining my system I should have felt that the *truth* of it remained untouched, — I had only failed in the way of showing it. I had repeatedly heard all the strongest arguments that could be adduced against me, and they never moved me. The first sermon I heard after I came to this place was a sermon from Dr. Skinner, on "Depravity." It was a masterpiece. As an effort of intellect, and for its logic, I admired it with all my heart. But I said, 'a man equally logical could answer him on the other side, and do even better *there*.' Besides, my pride was concerned; for I had been so openly and everywhere

committed to my faith, I had contended for it so often and with so many, that this *alone* might make it a hard matter for me to retract; almost impossible. And besides all this, when I began to think about being a Christian now, theology had been left out of my thoughts. I felt it was another thing that interested me. I did not wish to bring it up, and it never entered into my mind that it would be meddled with, much less that I should renounce one point. The idea of doing so I knew would have astonished me. Indeed, my attention had not been at all called to my theology, until arrested by finding it breaking away under me. But now, *understandingly, willingly*, I found I had given it all to the winds. *Human* agency seemed to have had nothing to do about it. Even you, sir, had to be called away, so I could not say your persuasion or influence had done it; and on the other hand, Mr. F— was right here to prompt me; nevertheless it was all gone. I had been almost entirely shut in to myself and my Bible, and there had been no form of argument or reason; the change had come about almost unconsciously to myself, like the wind blowing where it listeth. And now, what had done this? No person else had done it; and I felt that it *was not at all* like *me* to do it; it was the most unlike me of anything on earth; and then I felt convinced it must be some higher power — some divine agency. It must be so. And you cannot imagine with what tremendous power that conviction forced itself upon me; how it startled my very being! unless you know that my old speculations had led me to the conclusion that there was no such thing as the *special* influence of the Holy Spirit. I never could understand that doctrine of *special* divine influence. I thought it was irreconcilable with free moral agency, and so I concluded it was a delusion, or a mere figure of speech. But now I found God himself had taught it to me. The conviction forced itself upon me, that here was a work of God's Holy Spirit.

“And as I tried to account for all that I had experienced in any other way, (aiming to guard against being deceived again into a false hope), that passage came very strikingly to my mind, where the Jews, when they could not deny that devils were really gone out, said, ‘He casteth out devils by Beelzebub,’ and Christ

answered, ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand; if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself.’ That might be a crafty suggestion, I thought; but it was not like Satan to do for me what I had experienced, nor was it like my own wicked heart to do it. It must be *God*, who was leading me by His Spirit, ‘in a way that I knew not.’

“Then, in that night of reflection, I thought also of other things, many lesser things, in which, as it seemed, in spite of myself, I had been completely turned around. It did seem like turning the rivers of water. They were flowing backward against their current.

“Well *then*, I thought, if God’s Spirit has done such wonderful things in me, (and I could not now doubt it), if He has already done things which I never before believed *could* have been done, then *He can do all things else*; and He would, I did believe He would, I could trust Him that He would; He would work in me to will and to do what I could never do myself. He would continue the work that He had begun, and finish it in righteousness. There I could rest; there the promises seemed to meet me. God’s word was pledged, sure as His everlasting throne; He was faithful; the Word witnessed with the Spirit; and what He had promised, He was also able to perform. This was my light, my hope, and joy.

“And as I thus looked back, and saw how I *had* been led, I felt assured I might account, that the long-suffering of God was salvation; that He had purposes of mercy for me; and now, if He had met me, it had truly been when I ‘was a great way off;’ and He had received me in such a wonderful way, that He would have all the glory. I thought too, it was because He was a covenant-keeping God; and as He kept His covenant with faithful Abraham, because ‘he *believed* God, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness,’ so now He does keep His covenant with believing parents. And such faith as my father and mother exercised when they gave me to God, would be remembered and accepted, This seemed to me like another added to the multiplied assurances of His faithfulness, that He is a God keeping covenant and showing mercy; and therefore, He kept me from an utter destruction, and followed me with purposes of mercy, to make me ‘willing in the

day of His power.’ I did feel in my soul, that *He* had done everything for me, that had been done; so I could truly say, ‘*He* sent from above, *He* took me, *He* drew me out of many waters.’ Whatever I had learned, He had taught me; and I did believe, that same Spirit of truth would yet lead me into all truth. And I rejoiced, that our salvation did not depend any more upon our own will, or our own power of enduring unto the end; if it did, I felt it would be a yoke harder than that which the Jews were not able to bear. It was wonderful to think, how the whole work was of God. He paid the debt; He clothed us in his own righteousness; His Spirit made us willing, and then continues to work in us, keeping us by the *power of God* through faith unto salvation. Such contemplations and experiences as these assured my heart, I felt that God was with me. The darkness is past; the true light now shineth.

“It seems to me now, that one of my greatest errors has been, making my *reason* the test for everything, — bringing every principle to the court of *reason* for trial. Starting in that way, it is not wonderful that I fell into error. I see now that *faith* is infinitely higher, — just faith in God and His word. Reason gets blinded, dizzy, lost, where faith is clear, calm, steady, and in a region of light. Reason *cannot* understand the things of the Spirit of God; not that they are contrary to it, but beyond it, — seen only by faith. And this is one of the most wonderful things that I have learned, — the beauty and power of faith. I never could understand it before. It has perplexed me a great deal. If it meant anything more than a mere intellectual belief, I could not at all apprehend it. I believe I finally concluded it did not. But *now* I see it as everything. The Bible is full of it. And to think that is all, — just to *believe* God is able and willing to do it all, and let him do it, — it is wonderful *that* should be such a stone of stumbling. Yet as I think of it, it seems to me I cannot conceive of any such other sublime act of the mind as that *faith in things invisible*, which the Christian exercises; and to think, too, that any one, — the very lowest orders of intellect can and do exercise it strongly; it must be the work of the Spirit of God. Really to believe in God, in a

Saviour, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and to feel that the things of the soul and eternity are *realities*, seems to me like a new and wonderful thing. Even the thought that *there is a God*, as it happens to flash across my mind, *thrills* through my very soul. All these things, — it seems to me as if I had just been taught them.

“If I had been a Christian when I took hold of those theological matters it might have been different with me; but as it was, they pleased my unregenerate heart as well as my reason, and it startles me to think to what conclusions I was arriving. *I know* those doctrines well-nigh made shipwreck with me.

“The doctrine of election seems to me *now*, naturally, and necessarily to grow out of God’s sovereignty. I rebelled against it, because I rebelled against Him. And now nothing melts me like it. To hear Him say, ‘ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,’ and then to think there was not a shadow of merit or claim in me, but it was all His own sovereign, absolute will and pleasure, — I can only say, ‘not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name be all the glory.’ That He should have *predestinated* us unto the adoption of children according to the good pleasure of His will, is certainly in keeping with everything else that I have learned, — that it is all of God. ‘Esaias is very bold,’ but I begin to see how he may still be *right*, when he says, ‘I was found of them that sought me not, I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me.’

“I know and feel that there is yet a great deal to be done in my heart; but I believe I do feel more and more as if I could follow on through darkness and shadowy light, trusting that God will at length lead me out into perfect day. I cannot but think that my old rebellion is gone. I do feel willing that He should reign, and I rejoice that He does. And if I have any desire in my soul it is for God, for the living God, the God that reigns, and reigns in grace by Jesus Christ. While heaven once seemed desirable only as a place of security from eternal death, or at most, of intellectual pleasure, now what makes my heart go out for it is, that there I ‘shall be like Him, for I shall see Him as He is.’

“And now it is my heart’s desire to live ‘as seeing Him who is

invisible.’ And whatever it costs me, I would be a humble, decided, constant follower of Christ, feeling in my own soul the power of that faith, that ‘works by love, and purifies the heart,’ — living the life which I now live, ‘by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.’”

Conversion to God is conversion to truth.

Footnote:

This representation is true, but defective. I did not fail to impress upon her attention, her *obligation* to repent, her *duty* to be a Christian, and the truth, that she had *much to do*, which she must do freely, voluntarily. But I insisted upon it, that her *help* was in God, that she was an undone and dependent sinner, to be saved, if saved at all, by grace through Jesus Christ. I did “continually endeavour to impress upon her, that she could do nothing of herself.” It was needful to do so. That was a truth which she neither felt nor believed. I taught her, that she had “lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation,” and that she needed the Holy Spirit to “enable her freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good.” She speaks of her “favourite doctrine of ability.” It was a favourite falsehood with her: and I “continually endeavoured” to undeceive her.

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