

A lush forest scene with a stream and flowering bushes. The image is framed by a red border. The text "Inward Impressions" is written in a large, bold, red font with a black outline, centered in the upper half of the image. The background shows a dense forest of tall, thin trees, with a stream flowing through the center. In the foreground, there are green bushes with small pink flowers. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

Inward Impressions

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This is a subject which is rarely touched upon today, yet in certain quarters especially there is a real need that it should be dealt with. By inward impressions we have reference to some passage of Scripture or some verse of a hymn being laid upon the mind with such force that it rivets the attention, absorbs the entire inner man and is accompanied by such an influence, that the partaker thereof is deeply affected. For example: a person may have lived a most godless life, utterly unconcerned about spiritual things and eternal interests, when suddenly (perhaps while he was indulging the lusts of the flesh, his thoughts being entirely occupied with carnal objects), there sounded in his conscience the words, "Be sure your sin will find you out." So forcibly is he impressed, it seems as though someone must have audibly uttered those words, and he turns to discover the speaker, only to find he is alone. So deep is the impression, he cannot shake it off, and he is convicted of his lost condition and made to seek the Saviour.

No doubt each one who reads the above paragraph has heard or read some such case, perhaps many like it. And quite possibly a number of our readers are distressed in that there has been nothing in their own experience which corresponds thereto, and because there is not, they greatly fear they have never been truly converted. But such an inference is quite unwarranted. God does not act uniformly in the work of regeneration, any more than He does in creation or in providence; and we have met many who never had any such experience as we have described above, yet whose salvation we could not doubt for a moment. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Sometimes the wind blows with great velocity, at other times very gently and almost imperceptibly. But how foolish I would be if, seeing the leaves moving in the breeze, I denied the wind was blowing at all, merely because it came not with hurricane intensity!

The blowing of the wind is to be ascertained by the effects produced. Necessarily so, for the wind is invisible. But though the wind be invisible, the *results* it produces are not so: they can be

seen and felt, and it is by the breeze on our face and the stirring of the leaves that we perceive its actions, even though trees are not being uprooted thereby. “So is everyone that is born of the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is invisible, yet His presence may be ascertained by the effects which He produces. Sometimes He comes to a soul as it were in gale force, striking terror into the heart and carrying everything before Him: sweeping away the refuge of lies in which we were sheltering, tearing down our self-righteousness at a single stroke, and bowing us in conscious fear and conviction before Him. Thus it was in the case of Saul of Tarsus. But He does not always act thus—to other souls He comes as the gentle dove, so that His operations are imperceptible at the time, like the cases of Nathanael and Lydia.

A gardener sows his seed and for a while knows not whether his effort is going to meet with any success. He scans his ground, but as yet sees no results. Perhaps he begins to worry, fearing that his soil is unsuited to such vegetables or flowers. But a little later his fears are dispelled: the appearing of green shoots above the earth is the proof that his seed has germinated. Here is one deeply exercised about his state. He has sat under the preaching of some faithful servant of Christ and has sought to appropriate unto himself the Word of Life. But into what kind of soil (heart) has that Seed found abode? Is he but a wayside, a stony, a thorny, or a good-ground hearer (Matt. 13)?—*that* is the question which causes him so much concern. And rightly so, for there are very few good-ground hearers. And *how* is his problem to be solved? How is he to make sure whether he is a good-ground hearer? By the *results*, the fruits produced in his life.

But to return more directly to the point of inward impressions. After reading the last three paragraphs, probably some are inclined to say, Until I experience something like what you describe in the opening paragraph I shall be afraid to regard myself as genuinely converted: I must be sure that the Gospel has come to me not “in word only, but also *in power* and in the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:5). A very wise decision, my friend. But *how* are you going to determine whether the Gospel has come to you “in power and in the Holy Spirit?” By your senses? By your emotions? By some sentence of Scripture being deeply impressed on your mind? *That* is

not the right way of ascertaining. It is easy to be deceived at this point, for Satan can deeply impress the mind and stir the emotions, and when it serves his purpose employ the very words of Scripture, as he did when tempting the Saviour Himself. No, it is by some other, some surer way than that, you must determine your spiritual state.

Whether or not the Gospel has come to me “in power and in the Holy Spirit” is to be ascertained by *the effects produced in me*: not transient effects, but permanent; not simply in my consciousness, but in my life. If the Gospel has come to me “in power,” it has made me realize that I am a lost sinner—guilty and undone—it has made me realize that I can do nothing to save myself, nothing which can win God’s favour. If the Gospel has come to me “in power,” it has shut me up to Christ! It has not only revealed my dire need of Him, but has shown me how perfectly suited He is to my case, and how ready and willing He is to cleanse me from my sins and to heal my wounds. If the Gospel has come to me “in power,” it has made me come to Christ as an empty-handed beggar, casting myself on His mercy, and closing with His gracious offer to receive and by no means cast me out. If I have done this, it matters not an iota whether some particular verse of Scripture has been deeply impressed on my mind or not.

In the same way we may arrive at a well-grounded assurance of our acceptance with God. There are some who can testify that for a long season they remained in Doubting Castle, wondering whether they were the children of God or whether they were not. When suddenly the Lord spoke those words to their troubled souls, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love.” That text came to them with such sweetness and power, that their soul was quite melted down and all their fears were removed. But there are many gracious souls who have never shared this experience: no specific verse of Scripture has been impressed upon them, discovering that they are the Lord’s. Are we then to assume, must *they* conclude, that the absence of such an experience is proof they are yet in a state of nature? By no means. Yea, we go further: a Scripturally grounded assurance must rest upon a surer foundation than that, one that is less variable and more durable.

However powerfully a verse may be impressed on the mind, that

impression will gradually fade. However sweet and melting may be the accompanying effect, it will not remain with us. Frames and feelings are but evanescent, and *Satan may be the inspirer of them*. The Scriptural method for obtaining assurance is for us to prayerfully and impartially examine and test ourselves by the Word of God, to see whether or not we bear in ourselves those marks by which God's children are described and may be identified: such as mourning over sin, hungering after righteousness, grieving over unbelief, longing for conformity to Christ's image, separation from the world, walking in the way of God's commandments, distrust of self, praying daily for Divine grace. "The testimony of an enlightened conscience, judging by the Word of God, and deciding in our favour, that by His grace we have been enabled to take up the yoke of Christ, is in some respects a more satisfactory evidence that we are His and He is ours, than if an angel were sent from Heaven to tell us that our names are written in the Book of Life" (John Newton).

But let us not be misunderstood about what we have said above. Most certainly we do not deny that many of God's people have had verses of Scripture powerfully impressed upon their minds, nor is it our purpose here to discount the value and comfort of such an experience. No; rather do we desire to point out the tendency of many to ascribe a greater virtue to them than they justly possess, and to warn against some of the dangers attaching thereto. We have met those who attributed more importance to inward impressions than they did to outward walking in God's precepts—who would rather have a verse of Scripture laid with power on their mind than to have its spiritual meaning opened to their understanding—who placed a higher value on the comfort they received from some promise being spoken to them than they did of grace being given to deny self, take up the cross and follow Christ outside the camp.

If you ask some professing Christians, who are thoroughly carnal and worldly, what is the ground of their hope for eternity, they will tell you they have no fear of the judgment to come because at such and such a time a certain Scripture was "given to" or "spoken to" them, and on that impression they rest, without knowing anything personally and experimentally of the sanctifying operations of the Holy Spirit. We have no hesitation in saying that such people have

been misled by their own deceitful hearts, or deluded by Satan posing as an angel of light. On the other hand, were we to approach some, whom charity requires us to account regenerated persons, yet who are altogether lacking in assurance and full of doubts, and inquire of them the ground of such fears about their state, they would answer, "I never have had a Scripture promise applied to me as other Christians have, and therefore I must conclude that I am not an heir to God's promises." These poor souls need to be taught the way of the Lord more perfectly.

That which we wish to particularly press upon the reader is the vital importance and imperative necessity of his faith resting upon a sure foundation: that sure foundation is the *Word of God* and not any painful convictions or happy feelings we may have experienced; not resting on some deep impressions on our mind of some passage of Scripture, but on the Scripture itself. It is not a question of how complete a discovery has been made to me of the plague of my heart or how utterly vile I see and feel myself to be, but have I really taken the place of a sinner before God which matters the most. It is not do I sufficiently feel my need of Christ or do I clearly enough discern His excellencies and suitability to my case, but have I betaken myself to the sinner's Saviour and received Him as my own by a childlike faith? Nor is it the degree or strength of faith which renders it efficacious: no matter how weak it is, if it clings to *the right Object* it is sufficient.

Not only is there the danger of being deceived by Satan, and of resting our faith on a wrong foundation, but those who prize so highly these inward impressions generally turn for comfort to a fickle source. Even former experiences of God's kindness and present marks of grace within the soul, while good in their place, are like marks on a sundial, which say nothing in a cloudy and dark day, say nothing when the sun shines not. If we would have our comfort rest on a solid and unchanging foundation, we must betake ourselves to immediate and direct *believing*, making Christ and His righteousness the sole ground of our peace. Happy feelings and evidences of grace are to be made matters of comfort only as they are agreeable to the unerring rule of God's Word and as the Spirit breathes upon us, and by that Word in our heart bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.

The tendency to draw a false inference from the absence of such inward impressions has been mentioned above, but let us now enlarge a little thereon. It is highly probable that God often withholds the sealing testimony of His Spirit from some souls, not because they are yet in a state of nature, but because they make *an idol* of comfortable feelings. The only sure ground of faith is the Word of God and the Truth there spoken, and not our feelings. Comfortable feeling is not to be expected before we believe the Word of promise. If we have any feeling of God's love before our believing of His love, then we shall be foolish enough to build our faith upon transient frames and influences. Many *do* go wrong at this very point and build their faith on *feelings* of God's love rather than upon what He has said, and as their feelings constantly fluctuate so does their faith. This is the reason why there is no stability in such: on the mountain-top one day, in the slough of despond the next.

God is jealous, and therefore does He often withhold the comforts of His Spirit until we give Him the glory of His Truth by believing His love as it is revealed in the Scriptures. The woman with the issue of blood had no sensible feeling of virtue coming from Christ until she touched the hem of His garment (Luke 8:43-48). Grieve not if a sense of the plague of your heart keeps you poor and needy, empty and humble: Christ and His fullness will then be the more precious. Remember it is God's way to *humble* before He exalts. Not only has the Lord "heard the desire of the *humble*," but the assurance is given, "Thou wilt establish their heart" (Psa. 10:17 margin). Blessed indeed is that promise, "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; that He may set him with princes, even with the princes of His people" (Psa. 113:7, 8)—a promise which belongs to no wealthy, puffed up, and self-satisfied Laodicean.

God's way of bringing home His promises to the hearts of His people varies considerably. If you are able to plead a promise and make it a matter of prayer before God, that is much to be thankful for. If the promise comes not to you, go you to the promise of the Word and carry it to the Throne of Grace. Say to the Lord, Here is a promise which is suited to my case: may it please Your gracious Majesty to set it on my heart to my comfort. Depend more on the

promise itself than on any felt power and sensible influence in which it may come to you: the latter may vary, the former remains unchanged. God is most glorified when we go *out of ourselves* and rely wholly on what He is in Himself. Faith is strongest and healthiest when we live on bare promises without the supports of sense. Give God the credit for His veracity. Seek rest not in the streams of blessing and comfort, but in the Fountain.

When a looking and waiting for these inward impressions becomes the rule of duty, the ground of faith, and the foundation of comfort, the Word of God is grievously slighted, if not altogether set aside. A Divinely-given faith answers or responds to God's faithfulness in the promise, just as it stands in the written Word, without expecting or looking for any further confirmation of the warrant of faith. But a faith which answers to something other than the bare Word of God—to some impressions of it on the mind with light and power—is a fanciful faith, for it makes these impressions and feelings the ground and warrant of believing. How justly may God deliver up to delusion those who make an idol of their feelings and refuse to rest directly on that Word of Truth in which alone the Divine faithfulness is pledged.

A Divinely-given faith perceives the naked promise of God, as it is proclaimed in the gracious call and free offer of the Gospel, to be a sure and sufficient foundation for faith to rest upon, without any powerful impressions of it on the mind. If such impressions and comforts *are* given, they are not looked upon as affording any better warrant or surer title to believe the promise than they had before, nor do the possessors of such faith regard impressions and feelings—no, not even if they are still further brought before them in a vision or dream—as rendering the promise more sure of accomplishment than it was previously as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. A faith which will not rest on God's bare promise, which dare not meddle with it as it stands in the written Word until it has additional warrant from inward impressions, is a fanciful and worthless faith.

A Divinely-given faith stands not in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God; whereas a faith which has impressions for its foundation and comfortable feelings for its object, stands in the wisdom of the author of such impressions and feelings, whom we

greatly fear is in many instances an *evil spirit*, who finding other methods unsuccessful transforms himself as an angel of light that he may delude the unwary. Satan is determined to be worshipped in one way or another, and if he cannot secure our homage through the grosser baits by which he catches others, he will make use of our convictions and emotions. When any impression of which he is the author is *rested in*, he has gained his object and attained his desire. It matters not to him whether wood or iron, silver or gold, or happy frames be our idol, so long as it *be our idol*.

A Divinely-given faith will honour God and His Word without impressions, comfortable feelings, or even the endorsement of reason—yea, *against* the dictates of reason. Such was the faith of Abraham, the father of all them that believe. For when God promised him a son in his old age, he “considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom. 4:19, 20). Such is the faith of God’s elect: not merely a fair-weather commodity, but a supernatural grace which surmounts the storm. But a faith which rests on impressions is extinguished as soon as the impression wears off: such a faith fails its possessor in the cloudy and dark day, for its foundation is but a sandy and shifting one. Then look well, my reader, to your faith: to its origin, to the foundation it rests upon, to its enduring power.

N.B. How striking and blessed is it to observe the course followed by the Lord Jesus when He was tempted of Satan. Just previously an audible voice from Heaven had witnessed to His Divine Sonship, yet when the Devil assaulted Him, saying, “If Thou be the Son of God,” how did He repulse the Enemy’s attack? Not by saying, “I know that I am the Son of God because I have recently heard the voice of My Father testifying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’” No, He did not: instead, He had recourse to the written Word alone, saying, “It is written.” “It is written again,” “It is written!” And this, dear reader, was recorded for *our* instruction. Here, too, the Saviour has left His people an example that they should follow His steps.

