

Behold, He Prayeth

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

Charles G. Finney's conversion experience was a profound and radical transformation that led to a revival in Adams and had a lasting impact on his life and community.

Scripture: Psalm 51:17, Jeremiah 29:13, Matthew 10:32, Luke 15:7, Luke 18:10, Acts 2:38, Romans 3:22, Ephesians 2:8, James 4:10, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Conversion Experience", "Holy Spirit"

Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley preaches about the profound conversion experience of Charles G. Finney, highlighting his journey from seeking peace with God through prayer and Scripture to the moment of complete surrender and acceptance of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Finney's struggle with pride and shame, his intense prayers in the woods, and the subsequent overwhelming encounter with the Holy Spirit are emphasized, leading to his transformation and commitment to preach the gospel. The impact of Finney's conversion on the community, including the revival that followed, and the ripple effect on individuals like Judge Wright, who also found peace through prayer, is a testament to the power of genuine repentance and submission to God.

Transcript

ON THE evening of Sunday, October 7, 1821, after the services of worship were over, Finney reached the momentous decision that he would at once settle the question of his soul's salvation and if possible make his peace with God. On the following two days when not occupied with the duties of his profession he spent much time in prayer and a perusal of the Scriptures. These pursuits served but to deepen his convictions, and to conceal his emotions he resorted to the common subterfuge of avoiding his pastor and all religious people as much as possible. He stopped the keyhole of his door when he prayed, and was careful to keep his Bible out of sight whenever visitors appeared in the office.

Up to this time he had kept his copy of the Bible on a table with his law books and no thought of shame had occurred in connection with reading the sacred volume. Such, however, is the perversity of the human heart that, when the soul reaches its spiritual crisis, concealment is sought for these very emotions which under divine grace are calculated to issue in salvation. By Tuesday night his agitation of mind had increased until he had been brought to a condition well-nigh verging on despair. He was distressed with a presentiment that he was about to die, and he was sure that he would be lost if he did. The following morning as he was going to his office an inward voice seemed to admonish him: "What are you waiting

for? Did you not promise to give your heart to God? And what are you trying to do? Are you endeavoring to work out a righteousness of your own?"

As he revolved these problems in his mind the truth was impressed upon him that salvation was a gift, not to be wrought out by works, but to be appropriated by faith in Jesus Christ. The whole plan of salvation seemed to be revealed to him with great clearness as a finished work of grace through the atoning merits of the Son of God; instead of needing any righteousness of his own to commend him to God he needed but to submit himself to the righteousness of God that was in Christ Jesus. After pondering the matter for some moments this question came to his mind, "Will you accept it now, today?" He replied: "Yes, I will accept it today, or I will die in the attempt."

As a place suited to his purpose he sought the seclusion of a piece of woods where he had been in the habit of taking daily walks in pleasant weather. To escape observation he skulked along under a fence, and on reaching the cover of the forest he kneeled down beside a log and attempted to pray, but to his dismay he found he could not. His lips seemed to be sealed and his heart refused to pray. In an agony of spirit he communed with himself: "I cannot pray. My heart is dead to God and will not pray."

In view of Finney's subsequent insistence upon immediate submission to God as an essential condition to salvation, and his exhortation to sinners "to make themselves new hearts," the question might be raised as to the cause of the difficulty which he now experienced in making his peace with God. To this the reply might be given that, while he had revolted from the old idea of a physical and involuntary regeneration and the fact had just been impressed upon him that salvation was not of works but of faith, still the various steps in the process of salvation had not been clearly unfolded to him. Consequently he was as a blind man groping in the darkness with no one to direct him to the pathway of light.

His submission moreover was not complete. After several unsuccessful attempts to pray, once or twice he fancied that he heard a rustling in the leaves, and opening his eyes to see if anyone was present he was appalled at the thought of his own wickedness and pride of heart in being ashamed to have anyone see him in the attitude of prayer. "What!" he exclaimed, "such a degraded sinner as I am, on my knees, confessing my sins to a great and holy God, and ashamed to have any human being, and a sinner like myself, find me on my knees, endeavoring to make my peace with an offended God!" In deep agony of spirit he cried aloud to God for mercy.

At this juncture a passage of Scripture came into his mind as clearly as if he had just read it: "And ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." He did not remember ever having read this passage before, but he seized upon it with avidity and exclaimed: "Lord, I take thee at thy word. Thou knowest that I do search for thee with all my heart." Other passages occurred to him, and he continued thus to pray and accept promises until with a light heart he found himself tripping through the bushes toward the road and saying, "If ever I am converted I will preach the gospel."

On reaching the road that led to the village he found that his mind had suddenly become quiet and peaceful. He could not understand it. His sense of guilt was gone and he was unable to revive his conviction of sin. He thought that he must have quenched the Holy Spirit; and remembering the boldness of language which he had used in accepting the promises of God he suspected that he had committed the unpardonable sin. But try as he would he could not make himself anxious about it.

When he arrived in the village he found that the whole forenoon had passed, but having no appetite for dinner he went to his office and taking down his bass viol he began to play and sing some sacred songs. His heart was so melted at the words and the tears began to flow so freely that he was obliged to desist. The afternoon was occupied by Judge Wright and himself in transferring their books and furniture to another office. By evening everything had been set in order and his partner, having bidden him good night, departed for home.

As soon as Finney closed the door a deep feeling came upon him. He said: "The rising of my soul was so great that I rushed to the back room of the law office to pray, when it seemed to me as if I met the Lord Jesus face to face. It did not occur to me then, nor for some time afterward, that this was a wholly mental state. On the contrary it seemed to me that I saw him as I would see any other man. I wept aloud like a child. It seemed to me that I bathed his feet with my tears. I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart." Soon after there came upon him a "mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost" and wave after wave of divine influence seemed to sweep over him. At last he cried out, "I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me, Lord I cannot bear any more."

Late that evening a member of the choir came into the office and on finding Finney in tears inquired, "Mr. Finney, what ails you? Are you in pain?" "No, but so happy that I cannot live." The visitor hurried out and brought in an elder of the church, to whom Finney began to narrate his experience. While he was thus engaged a young man of the neighborhood who was preparing for college stepped into the office and on listening to Finney's story was so impressed that he exclaimed, "Do pray for me!" Not long afterwards the young man was converted.

The following morning, although he had not yet received the assurance of sins forgiven, a similar baptism came upon him. In this enraptured state he was taught the doctrine of justification by faith. He realized that through faith in Jesus Christ forgiveness was a present experience. The consciousness of sin and the guilt of sin were gone, and he experienced no more sense of condemnation for his past sins than if he had never sinned.

Such in brief is the story of the remarkable conversion of this remarkable man. His conversion was as profound and as strongly marked as that of the Apostle Paul. Those who knew him in after years have said that he was not the sort of man in whom they would have expected such experiences. He was too rugged and the type of his mind seemed too masculine for him to be moved in any such way. That the change thus wrought was the work of God is evidenced by his whole subsequent life.

The practice of law immediately lost all of its attractions. That very morning a deacon of the church, who had employed him as his attorney in a suit at law, called at the office to remind him that the trial was to take place at ten o'clock. Finney replied: "I have enlisted in the service of Christ and have a retainer to plead his cause. You must therefore seek another attorney to attend the suit." With bowed head the deacon left the office and straightway settled the case. He then gave himself to prayer and soon entered into a deeper religious experience.

The news of Finney's conversion created intense excitement throughout the town of Adams and was received with incredulity. Some time before, a man had said to his wife who was a praying woman: "If religion is true, why don't you Christians convert Finney? If you can convert him, I will believe that there is something in religion." So hopeless, if not impossible, seemed the task. An old lawyer when he heard the rumor said: "There is nothing in it. It is just a practical joke. Finney is making sport of the Christian people

in the place and is trying to see what he can make them believe." Even Mr. Gale, the minister, refused to believe the report and declared it to be untrue.

That evening, although no appointment had been made for a service, the people of the village by common consent flocked to the church which was filled to overflowing. Mr. Gale was present but no one seemed disposed to open the meeting, whereupon Finney arose and went forward. Although used to addressing courts, juries, and public gatherings, at first as his great expressive eyes swept over the audience he was panic-stricken and involuntarily exclaimed to himself, "My God, is it I?" But mustering courage and gaining confidence as he proceeded, he gave a graphic account of what had happened, telling of the purpose which he had formed to become a Christian, of the mighty struggle which had surged within him as he knelt by the side of the log in the woods, of the great pride of his heart which seemed to be a tremendous stumblingblock in the way of his submission to God, and finally of his knowledge of sins forgiven together with the joy and peace which he had received in believing.

As he unfolded the story of his remarkable conversion his fellow townsmen were profoundly moved. The man who had asked his wife why they didn't convert Finney was present, but so agitated did he become that in the midst of the service he went home without taking his hat. The old lawyer who had declared that the story of his conversion was a hoax was also on hand, and he too left before the meeting was over affirming that Finney was insane. He said, "He is in earnest, there is no mistake; but he is deranged, that is clear." Mr. Gale arose at the close of Finney's remarks and made apology for refusing to believe the report of his conversion and for discouraging the people in their purpose to make him a subject of prayer.

Following this meeting Finney summoned the members of his choir together, and, acknowledging that he had been a stumblingblock in the way of their salvation, urged them to accept Christ at once. Within a short time everyone of them was converted and united with the church. Among their number was a daughter of Judge Wright who became the mother of Bishop Henry B. Whipple of Minnesota. A revival followed which resulted in numerous conversions and extended throughout the entire county. Daily meetings were sustained for several weeks, and a number of the leading men in the community were influenced to turn to God.

It frequently happens that when a person passes through a profound religious experience a tendency develops on the part of others to attempt to reproduce it. The idea also develops that such an experience is necessary. This proved the case in Adams at that time, and it is interesting to note that many were converted in the woods and on the very spot where Finney had made his submission to God.

Among those who were thus affected was Judge Wright, Finney's law partner. On the morning after his conversion, when the Judge came into the office, Finney said a few words to him on the subject of salvation. These words pierced him like an arrow and without making any reply he dropped his head. A few minutes later he left the office. In the days that followed several persons were converted in the woods, and when Judge Wright heard them narrate their experience he resolved that he never should go to the woods to pray. To him it seemed an unnecessary procedure. He said, "I have a parlor to pray in, I am not going to the woods." Weeks passed by and his convictions deepened. He tried to persuade himself that it was not pride that kept him from Christ, and so when he would be going home from meeting he would kneel in the street and pray. He would even look about for a mud puddle in which to pray, to show that he had no pride in the matter, but still no peace came. Realizing at last that pride was, nevertheless, the great obstacle in the way of his salvation he decided to yield. On going to the woods and kneeling down to pray he was filled with such a sense of peace and joy that he was well-nigh overcome.

Ten years after Finney's conversion he had become a noted evangelist and the log in the woods by the side of which he had kneeled down to pray likewise had become noted and was pointed out to strangers visiting the town of Adams. About that time Jedidiah Burchard conducted a series of meetings in the community. A young man who had been brought under the influence of these meetings decided that he must go to the woods and be converted in precisely the same way as Mr. Finney. He kneeled down beside the log for a long time, but no peace of mind came to him and in amazement he said to himself: "I know that this is the log where Mr. Finney kneeled, and I am sure that I have humbled myself as low as he did. What is the matter?" Greatly troubled he started on his homeward way thinking that perhaps he was not among the elect or else had sinned away his day of grace. As he pondered the matter he finally asked himself, "What is religion?" Then the thought occurred to him: "It is serving God; it is obedience. Why not commence now, right here?" He said "I will," and so on his homeward way he realized that religion is not a great experience, but obedience to God, no less truly than had Mr. Finney in the woods ten years before.

No man's conversion was more thorough and radical than that of Charles G. Finney. He interpreted very literally the words of Jesus, "whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple." He soon came to the conclusion that it was his duty to withdraw from the Masonic fraternity. In the membership of the lodge at Adams there were a number of men as thoroughly irreligious as any he had ever known, men who were very intemperate and very profane, the kind of men with whom he never would have thought of associating had they not been Freemasons. After his conversion Finney attended a meeting of the lodge and although called upon to offer prayer he was depressed and felt strangely out of place. Instinctively he recoiled from further fellowship with men whom he knew to be out of sympathy with religion. Finally without consulting anyone he requested his discharge from the lodge and thereafter refused to be recognized as a Freemason.

Not long after his conversion Finney visited his aged parents at Henderson. His father met him at the gate, saying, "How do you do, Charles?" to which he replied: "I am very well, father, body and soul. But father, you are an old man; all of your children have grown up and have left your house; and I never heard a prayer in my father's house." His father dropped his head and burst into tears saying: "I know it, Charles. Come in and pray yourself." He did so with the result that his father and mother were deeply moved and soon after both were converted. He remained in town two or three days conversing with everybody whom he met upon the great theme of salvation. Within a week a meeting was started in the town which was followed by far reaching results for good. "From this meeting," said Finney, "the work of the Lord spread forth in every direction all over the town. And thus it spread at that time from Adams as a centre, throughout nearly all the towns in the county."

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