

THE LEADING OF THE LORD

A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Jessie Penn-Lewis

This is a testimony from a servant of God who had a fruitful through the Welsh revival and deeper Life devotional writings. She was born in 1861 in South Wales; even decades after her home-going, thousands of her books are sold yearly. In spite of her gender [in turn of the century culture] and poor health, God used her to teach His Word in distant lands such as Russia, India, and North America. To what spiritual lessons did she attribute her usefulness to God's Kingdom? What can we learn from her ministry?

I was brought up in the very heart of the religious life of Wales, for my grandfather was a Welsh divine, well known throughout the Principality in his day; and my father's house was a rendezvous for the ministers as they passed hither and thither on their Master's work. My childhood's memories gather round their visits and the great meetings of the Sunday schools, when often I sat as a tiny child in the midst of the grave elders in the "big pew", listening with intense interest to the "hwyl" of the minister. "The mercy of the Lord is ... unto children's children; but as it is often with children brought up in the midst of religious surroundings, the true inward change of heart did not come until I had married and moved away to England. Then it occurred without the aid of any human instrument, but the day - New Year's Day - and hour are imprinted on my mind.

Only a deep, inward desire to know that I was a child of God; a taking down of my (too little read) Bible from the shelf; a turning over the leaves, and the eye falling on the words, "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6); again, a casual turn of the sacred pages, and the words, "He that believeth hath eternal life" (John 6:47). A quick facing out whether I did believe that God had laid my sins upon the Lamb of God on the Cross; a pause of wonderment that it really said that I had eternal life if I simply believed God's Word; a quick cry of "Lord, I do believe" - and one more soul had passed from death to life (John 5:24), a trophy of the grace of God, and the love of Him Who died. The Spirit of God instantly bore witness with my spirit that I was a child of God (Romans 8:16), and deep peace filled my soul.

The new life bore fruit in that I sought to conquer my besetting sins, whereas hitherto I had found myself at their mercy, as I feebly attempted to restrain them. But my attempts still ended in abject failure, and the succeeding few months were a record of bitter repentance, and many tears over sins I could not conquer. At this point we removed to Richmond, Surrey, and found our way to Holy Trinity Church. The first sermon I heard from Rev. Evan H. Hopkins was an opening of heaven to my soul. I learned the secret of victory, and it was not long before I proved the power of God to deliver from the bondage of sin through the precious blood of Christ.

Under the Spirit-lit teaching of Mr Hopkins, and the earnest, loving help of his noble wife, I learned the joy of full surrender and the possibilities of a Spirit-filled life

(Ephesians 5:18). But active service for Christ seemed far away from me, for from childhood my health had been frail, and now winter after winter was spent in increasing suffering from bronchial and lung attacks. It seemed as if my life was slowly ebbing away. Nevertheless, in 1890, with apparently only a brief span of life before me, I ventured to take the Hon. secretaryship of the Richmond Y.W.C.A. Institute - "If only for six months", I said, for my whole heart was drawn out in service for the King.

Gradually I learnt to draw upon the Lord for strength for His work, so that in spite of continued ill health and suffering, I worked, and organised, and laboured incessantly. But after a time I became conscious that the spiritual results were not equivalent to the labour of the work. I began to question whether I knew the fullness of the Spirit. Without doubt I had received Him, and had "entered into rest" as concerned my own life and fellowship with God (Hebrews 4:10); but, when I compared the small results of my service with the fruit given to the apostles at Pentecost, I could not but own that I did not know the Holy Spirit in the fullness of His power. My weekly Bible class also was a great trouble to me, for I had no power of utterance. Organising work was much easier, but meetings were a sore trial. Self-consciousness almost paralysed me, and no practice ever made speaking less difficult. Others might have the gift of speech, but it was clearly not given to me, I said!

"But did God promise to us today as full an indwelling and outworking of the Spirit as in the days of Pentecost?" was my question, and I began to read book after book on the subject, until I was more and more confused. Finally, I put all on one side, and threw myself upon God to teach me Himself to know the fullness of the Spirit in power for service, as I had known Him for sanctification of life. For months I prayed, until my soul became "a furnace of intense desire", and I was ready to count all things loss, if God would but grant me that which I desired. I did not know then that He was already beginning to answer my prayers, by preparing me for deeper surrender to all His will. The more I prayed, the more there seemed to be a blight upon my much loved work; and I was greatly perplexed. The fulfilment of my petitions seemed further away than ever. Then the Spirit of God began to question me, and to bring to light the "thoughts and intents" of my heart (Hebrews 4:12).

Why did I desire the fullness of the Spirit? Was it for success in service, and that I should be considered a "much used worker"? Would I desire the same fullness of the Spirit if it meant apparent failure, and becoming "the offscouring of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:13) in the eyes of others? This had not occurred to me before, and I quickly agreed to any conditions the Lord should please to set before me.

Again came the question: Would I be willing to have no great experience, but agree to live and walk entirely by faith on the Word of God? This, too, was a new aspect, but I quickly answered "Yes". Then came the climax, when one morning I awoke, and, lo, I beheld before me a hand holding up in terrible light a handful of filthy rags, whilst a gentle voice said: "This is the outcome of all your past service for God" (Isaiah 64:6). "But, Lord, I have been surrendered and consecrated to Thee all these years. It was consecrated work!" "Yes, My child, but all your service has been consecrated self; the outcome of your own energy; your own plans for winning souls; your own devotion. All for Me, I grant, but yourself all the same." Then came the still small voice once more, and this time it was with one little word - "Crucified".

“Crucified!” What did it mean? I had not asked to be crucified, but to be filled. But since the Spirit of God kept ringing the word “Crucified” in my heart, He must know best. As a little child, I rested on the word thus given; and then, “it pleased God to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him” (Galatians 1:15-16), I knew the risen Lord.

The Holy Spirit already dwelling in my heart had fulfilled His office, and revealed the risen Lord in full possession of His temple. “Glorious, indeed, is this Anointing! Where will it end? Waters to swim in - no little trickling rivulet!” wrote Mrs Hopkins to me on March 25, 1892. Immediately the living waters broke out as “torrents” in the work, and like a “tidal wave” lifted it, so to speak, on to a new plane, my fellow workers coming into the tide with joy. The Bible classes were thronged; on all sides souls were convicted of sin, and brought to Christ. The converts became, in their turn, soul sinners. The dead prayer meetings were changed into times of blessed access to the Father. In such an atmosphere of the Holy Spirit none could be dumb. Answers to prayer rejoiced our hearts. Souls were won for Christ even at our social gatherings.

The usual trouble over finances changed into records of sometimes romantic answers to prayer; we learnt that where the Holy Spirit was free to work He provided the funds, and deficits in our yearly balance sheets were things of the past.

We had sought to arouse missionary interest with difficulty, but in the atmosphere of the Spirit our hearts became enlarged. We began to pray for the whole world, and to ask that the living waters flowing amongst us might reach to the ends of the earth - the Lord answering these prayers by the scattering of one and another to various parts of the world, whilst calls poured in upon me to carry the message of abundant life to other places in Great Britain.

Two years had I laboured in my own strength without the anointing Spirit, and four happy years afterwards was I permitted to watch what He could do, when we consent to be “crucified”, and to give Him right of way through us to souls. My “six months” had been prolonged into six years by the wondrous grace of God. Then came the wider service which God had purposed for me, and which I had not dreamed of, when I sought the fullness of the Spirit - and which, from physical frailty, it seemed impossible ever could be mine. But by this time the knowledge of my resources in God had grown, and I was able to cast myself in utter abandonment upon Him, and find all-sufficiency for all my need, at all times and in all circumstances.

In 1896 we removed to Leicester, and at once came a call to Sweden. Another crisis in my life had come. Raised from the grave, so to speak, for the Lord’s service, my husband felt, with me, that my life was a trust from God to be used only for the Master’s Kingdom. With one mind we yielded that life anew to Him Who claimed it, that He might make the fullest possible use of the frail vessel. Not disobedient to the heavenly vision, I crossed the North Sea to Stockholm for the first Scandinavian Conference of the Y.W.C.A. Delegates from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, gathered together, and the devotional meetings held in a beautiful hall were thrown open to the public. It was my first experience of speaking through an interpreter, and on the last day I saw the Holy Spirit move upon the large audience in a remarkable way; at the close of the afternoon meeting many broke out into prayer at the same time, each in his own language - yet there was no discord. It seemed to me like the music of a rippling brook. Was it thus at Pentecost?

The year after this came a call to Russia, where I went for a few weeks two winters in succession, visiting Finland for a few days, and Denmark, twice, on my way home. In 1898 I went for a second visit to Finland for a great Conference held at Helsingfors, when about eighty delegates were present from all parts of the country. Most of the devotional meetings were entrusted to me, and on the last day I gave the Lord's message, morning, afternoon, and evening, with two translators - Swedish and Finnish - the power of God upon us making the message as clear and full as if it were the original language of the people.

In the summer of 1900 the way opened for a brief tour in America, where I held meetings amongst the people of God in Canada and the United States, visiting Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, Chicago (Moody Bible Institute), Northfield, Philadelphia, and New York City. Again, during the early months of 1903, I visited Southern India, giving Bible readings in Bombay, Madras, Bangalore, Coonoor, and Ootacamund.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE PURPOSE OF GOD IN THE WIDER SERVICE THUS GIVEN TO ME?

The change in my own life as a Christian worker - working without and with the fullness of the Anointing Spirit - has been so definite and marked, that from the time of my own emergence into liberty, Christian workers have been the burden of my heart. From the hour the Spirit of God whispered "Crucified" to me, I also saw clearly the principle of death with Christ as the basis for the full working of God through the believer. It was as great a revelation to me as when at the first I saw my "iniquity laid upon Him" on the tree (Isaiah 53:6). In one instant I understood that if my sins were there, they were not on me. In like manner when I was seeking, with all the intensity of my being, the fullness of the Holy Ghost, after the word "Crucified" came, I understood very quickly the key to the full possession and outworking of the blessed Spirit in co-operation with our surrender, trust, and obedience.

"Crucified with Christ," there is room for Him to fill us; and we have only to consent to be out of His way on the Cross, and yield implicit obedience to His workings. How simple the plan, yet how deep, for it gives no place to the creature to glory before God (1 Corinthians 1:31)!

The light given of God that day has never since been unseen or questioned. The Lord had revealed to me a principle which, if applied and acted upon, would lead out into unknown realms of blessing and undreamed of possibilities. We speak of "applied chemistry". What discoveries are made in the laboratory of the scientist as he applies the principles he knows! So in the spiritual realm. The Lord had mightily sealed His Word to me with a glorious out-flowing of the rivers of life; but this would not do to rest upon as a basis for future service. The "experiences" varied and changed, and passed away from my memory; but the principle upon which God would work out His purposes through me never changed. I found it "work" in every circumstance; every new test; every new aspect of life. Every fresh call to wider service was only a fresh occasion for proving the secret I had learned. When each "impossible" thing confronted me, or trial of any kind, I would simply appeal to God to prove His own Word that I was crucified with Christ, and then in childlike faith I would cast myself upon Him to undertake the service, or meet the need through me (2 Corinthians 4:10-11).

I found also that, as I thus “continued in the faith, grounded and settled” (Colossians 1:23), the Holy Spirit wrought deeper and deeper into my inner life, unveiling aspects of one’s being hitherto unknown; but all was met with the word “Crucified”, and as I thus consented daily to be made conformable to the death of the Lord Jesus, I found richer and fuller outgoings of the Spirit of God to others (Philippians 3:10). The words of Paul became aglow with light - “Death worketh in us, and life in you” (2 Corinthians 4:12). Clearer and clearer grew the wondrous plan. Crucified with Christ, the risen Lord takes the inner throne, and leading us on into ever-deepening fellowship with Him in death, He manifests His life in glorious power, working in us that which is well pleasing in His sight; fulfilling His promise that out of the depths of our being shall be poured forth torrents of living water (John 7:38).

Thus I was led on, until in the fulfilment of His greater purposes He took me again to the place called Calvary, and gave me such an unveiling of His death, that it eclipsed all the previous revelations of Himself. The Holy Spirit had whispered “Crucified”, and revealed to me the Risen Lord; but now the glorious Risen One Himself poured the light upon His death, until my cross was lost in the sight of His. I could only cry, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom the world hath been crucified to me, and I unto the world!” (Galatians 6:14).

Then I knew the purpose of the wider service He had given me. I saw, as never before, the “Word of the Cross” to be the power of God, and determined henceforth to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). He had spoken the word “crucified with Him” (Romans 6:6), and I had proved the deliverance it brought to me; but now I saw what Calvary meant to Him, and yielded myself afresh to the Eternal Spirit for the special service of proclaiming the Cross and the passion of the Son of God, that He might see the fruit of His travail, and be satisfied (Isaiah 53:11).

From this time I was kept under the “burden” of this message, increased by watching the darkness that was slowly creeping over our beloved land at the very same time that the light of God in His people was burning brighter and brighter. The increasing darkness, on the one hand, seems to intensify the light on the other.

Can it be possible that the Most High God will look on, without giving His people a renewed and mighty testimony to the Gospel of Calvary?

May God the Holy Spirit lay upon every messenger of God today, at home and abroad, the supreme need of proclaiming the “Evangel” - the Gospel of the atoning death of the Son of God - and clothe each one with the Holy Ghost to preach the Cross in all its aspects, as Paul the Apostle preached it, ere the Lord returns for His own.

“Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us - unto HIM be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)