

The Conversion of Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844)

by Asahel Nettleton

Asahel Nettleton's conversion experience was a long and difficult process, marked by struggles with self-righteousness, doubts, and infidelity, but ultimately resulting in a deep and abiding sense of peace and joy in his salvation.

Scripture: Psalm 51:10, Jeremiah 17:9, John 3:3, Romans 3:23, Romans 8:16, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:8, Ephesians 2:10, 1 Peter 5:5, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Conversion Experience", "Regeneration"

Description

Asahel Nettleton shares his profound journey of conversion, starting from a moral life to a deep realization of his need for a change of heart and the necessity of regeneration. He grapples with the fear of eternal damnation, struggles with self-righteousness, and battles with doubts and unbelief, even questioning the existence of God. Through deep conviction of sin and thorough self-examination, he experiences a transformative encounter with God's grace, finding peace, joy, and a newfound love for God and His people. Nettleton's prolonged season of conviction equips him with a profound understanding of the human heart, preparing him for a remarkable ministry marked by pre-eminent success.

Transcript

The following account of the conversion of Asahel Nettleton is taken from Bennet Tyler's work *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.* published in 1844, the year of Nettleton's death.

"From my earliest age, I endeavored to live a moral life, being taught that God would punish sinners; but I did not believe that I should suffer for the few offenses of which I had been guilty. Having avoided many sins which I saw in others, I imagined all was well with me, till I was about eighteen years old, when I heard a sermon preached upon the necessity of regeneration, which put me upon thinking of the need of a change of heart in myself. I did not, however, well receive the discourse at the time for I was sensible I knew nothing about such a change neither did I wish to know, for I believed myself as good as others without it, and to be equal with them, I thought would be sufficient.

However, the thought troubled me considerably from day to day, and caused me to think of praying, which I had never done, except repeating some form as a little child, and doing it to remove the stings of a guilty conscience when I considered myself in imminent danger. Sometime after this, I heard another sermon

that convinced me I had quenched the spirit, which occasioned the most alarming fears that I should forever be left to eat the fruit of my own ways. Supposing I was alone in the thoughts of eternity, I separated myself from all company, and determined to seek an interest in Christ.

I concluded something must be done to appease God's anger. I read and prayed and strove in every possible way to prepare myself to go to God, that I might be saved from his wrath. The more I strove in this selfish way, the more anxious I was, and no hope was given. Soon I began to murmur and repine, and accused God of the greatest injustice in requiring me to return to him, and while I was striving with all my might, as I supposed, he appeared not to regard me. I considered God obligated to love me, because I had done so much for him, and finding no relief, I wished that he might not be, and began really to doubt the truths of his holy word, and to disbelieve his existence; for if there was a God, I perfectly hated him.

I searched the scriptures daily, hoping to find inconsistencies in them, to condemn the Bible because it was against me; and while I was diligently pursuing my purpose, everything I read, and every sermon I heard condemned me. Christian conversation gave me the most painful sensations. I tried to repent, but I could not feel the least sorrow for my innumerable sins. By endeavoring to repent, I saw my heart still remained impenitent. Although I knew I hated everything serious, yet I determined to habituate myself to the duties which God required, and see if I could not by that means be made to love him, and I continued in this state some months.

The fear of having committed the unpardonable sin, now began to rise in my mind, and I could find no rest day nor night.-When my weary limbs demanded sleep, the fear of awaking in a miserable eternity prevented the closing of my eyes, and nothing gave me ease. No voice of mirth, or sound whatever was heard, but what reminded me of the awful day when God shall bring every work into judgment. All self-righteousness failed me; and having no confidence in God, I was left in deep despondency.

After a while, a surprising tremor seized all my limbs, and death appeared to have taken hold upon me. Eternity, the word eternity, sounded louder than any voice I ever heard, and every moment of time seemed more valuable than all the wealth of the world. Not long after this, an unusual calmness pervaded my soul, which I thought little of at first, except that I was freed from my awful convictions and this sometimes grieved me, fearing I had lost all conviction. Soon after, hearing the feelings of a Christian described, I took courage, and thought I knew by experience what they were.

The character of God, and the doctrines of the Bible which I could not meditate upon before without hatred, especially those of election and free grace, now appear delightful, and the only means by which, through grace, dead sinners can be made the living sons of God. My heart feels its sinfulness To confess my sins to God, gives me that peace which before I knew nothing of. To sorrow for it, affords that joy which my tongue can not express. Were I sensible that at death, my hope would perish, yet it seemeth to me now, that I could not willingly quit the service of God, nor the company of Christians; but my unfaithfulness often makes me fear my sincerity; and should I at last be raised to glory, all the praise will be to God for the exhibition of his sovereign grace."

This account was written not far from the time when he made a profession of religion; and interesting as it is, it contains but an imperfect sketch of the exercises of his mind, during the ten months in which time Spirit of God was striving with him. I add a few facts which are copied from a memorandum made immediately after hearing from his own lips, a more minute and particular account of his conversion. In giving this account, he remarked that the foregoing printed statement, is not exactly as he wrote it.

Some verbal alterations were made in it, which, although they were not intended to affect the sense, do affect it in some degree; particularly in the sentence in which these words occur, "When I heard a sermon preached upon the necessity of regeneration, which put me upon thinking of the need of a change of heart in myself." This, as it now reads, seems to convey time idea, that his attention was first awakened to the concerns of his soul, by a particular sermon. But this was not true, nor was such an idea expressed in the original manuscript.

His first permanent religious impressions occurred in the following manner: On the night of the annual Thanksgiving, in the fall of 1800, he attended a ball. The next morning, while alone, and thinking with pleasure on the scenes of the preceding night, and of the manner in which he had proposed to spend the day, in company with some of his young companions; the thought suddenly rushed upon his mind, we must all die, and go to the judgment, and with what feelings shall we then reflect upon these scenes?

This thought was, for the moment overwhelming; and it left an impression on his mind, which he could not efface. His pleasing reflections on the past, and anticipations of time future, vanished at once, and gave place to feelings of a very different kind. These feelings he concealed; but he could not entirely banish them from his mind. The world had lost its charms. All those amusements in which he had taken delight, were overcast with gloom. His thoughts dwelt much on the scenes of death, judgment and eternity.

He knew that he had an immortal soul that must be happy or miserable in the future world; and although he had consoled himself with the thought that he was as good as others around him, and that his condition was, of course, as safe as theirs; yet he now felt conscious that he was unprepared to meet his God. He at the same time perceived that he was liable every moment to be cut down by the stroke of death, and summoned to his last account. He had no peace of mind by day or by night.

Although, at this time, he had no very just conceptions of the divine law, or of the depravity of his heart; yet he was sensible that he was a sinner, and that his sins must be pardoned, or he could not be saved. The duty of prayer was now forcibly impressed upon his mind, a duty which he had almost entirely neglected; and it was not without a great struggle in his feelings, that he was brought to bend the knee to Jehovah. At the same time, he gave himself much to the reading of the Scriptures and other religious books, and separated himself as much as possible from thoughtless companions.

So far as he knew, and so far as is now known, there was, at that time, no other person in the town under serious impressions. The young people with whom he had been most intimate, were exceedingly thoughtless, and given to vain and sinful amusements. They were, at this time, making arrangements for the establishment of a dancing school, and they expected his aid and cooperation in the measure. But to their astonishment, he utterly refused to have anything to do with it. He had made up his mind to quit forever quit such amusements, and to seek the salvation of his soul.

But as he did not reveal his feelings to any of his associates, they knew not how to account for this sudden change in his appearance and conduct. Some, perhaps suspected the true cause; while others supposed that for some reason, unknown to them, his affections had become alienated from his former friends. Thus, for months, he mourned in secret, and did not communicate his feelings to a single individual. During this period, he had a strong desire that some of his young companions would set out with him in pursuit of religion; and although his proud heart would not permit him to make known to them the state of his mind, yet he occasionally ventured to expostulate with them on the folly and sinfulness of their conduct, and to some few individuals, he addressed short letters on the same subject.

These warnings were treated by some, with ridicule and contempt. On the minds of others, they made an impression, which, as he afterwards learned, was never effaced. This was particularly the case with Philander Parmele, who was afterwards his classmate in College, and intimate friend through life.* When Mr. Nettleton first became anxious respecting the salvation of his soul, he had not, as has been remarked, any very just conceptions of the depravity of his heart. He was sensible that he was not in a safe condition.

He knew that he needed something which he did not possess, to prepare him for heaven. He had a general vague idea that he was a sinner, but he saw not the fountain of iniquity within him. As is common with persons when awakened to a sense of their danger, he went about to establish his own righteousness. He vainly presumed that by diligent and persevering efforts, he should recommend himself to the favor of God. He was accordingly very abundant in his religious services. He not only abandoned those amusements in which he had delighted, and forsook in a great measure the society of those who took no interest in the subject of religion; but he spent much time in retirement, earnestly crying to God for mercy.

He would often repair to the fields and forests for this purpose, and he sometimes spent a large part of the night in prayer. In this way, he expected to obtain the forgiveness of his sins, and the peace and consolation which God has promised to his people. But after laboring for some time in this manner, he became alarmed at his want of success. God seemed to pay no regard to his prayers: and how to account for this fact he knew not. At this crisis, he was assailed by infidel doubts.-The question arose in his mind, whether he had not proved the Bible to be false.

It is written, Ask and ye shall receive, Seek and ye shall find. He said to himself, I have asked, but I have not received-I have sought but I have not found. How then can these promises be true? And how can the book which contains them, be the word of God? He found himself disposed to cherish these doubts, and to seek for further proof that the Bible is not true. He searched the Scriptures on purpose to find contradictions in them, and he even went so far as to begin to doubt the existence of a God.

Like the fool, he said in his heart there is no God; that is, he wished there were none; for he was sensible that if there was a God, he was not reconciled to his character; and he wished the Bible to be false, because he saw that it condemned him. But his efforts to satisfy himself that religion is not a reality, did not succeed. The thought would sometimes arise, what if the Bible should prove to be true? Then I am lost forever. This would fill him with inconceivable horror.

These struggles in his mind, led him to a more just knowledge of his character and condition. he began to see the plague of his own heart. His doubts respecting the truth of the promises which God has made to those who ask, and seek, were dispelled by the painful conviction that he never had asked and sought as God requires. The commandment came, sin revived, and he died. He saw that God looks on the heart, and that he requires holy and spiritual service of his creatures; that he seeketh such to worship him, as worship him in Spirit and in truth.

He saw at the same time that in all his religious services, he had been prompted by selfish motives. He saw that in all which he had done, he had no love to God, and no regard to his glory; but that he had been influenced solely by a desire to promote his own personal interest and happiness. He saw that in all the distress which he had experienced on account of his sin, there was no godly sorrow,-no true contrition. He had not hated sin because it was committed against God, but had merely dreaded its consequences.

He had taken great pains to cleanse the outside of the cup and the platter, but he now perceived that the inside was full of all uncleanness. And he was thoroughly convinced, that "No outward form could make him clean, The leprosy lay deep within,"

He had prayed, and wept and promised, but he now saw, that

"His prayers and tears and vows were vile, His duties black with guilt."

During this period he read President Edwards' narrative of the revival of religion in Northampton, and the memoir of Brainerd. These served very much to deepen the conviction of his utterly lost condition. The preaching which he heard from time to time, also greatly distressed him. As he says in his narrative, every sermon condemned him. Nothing gave him any relief. He seemed to be sinking daily deeper and deeper in guilt and wretchedness. One day, while alone in the field, engaged in prayer, his heart rose against God, because he did not hear and answer his prayers.

Then the words of the Apostle, the carnal mind is enmity against God, came to his mind with such overwhelming power, as to deprive him of strength, and he fell prostrate on the earth. The doctrines of the Gospel, particularly the doctrines of divine sovereignty and election, were sources of great distress to him. There was much talk respecting these doctrines, at that time, in North Killingworth. Some disbelieved and openly opposed them. He searched the Scriptures with great diligence to ascertain whether they are there taught; and although his heart was unreconciled to them, he dared not deny them, for he was convinced that they were taught in the Bible.

He would sometimes say to himself, if I am not elected, I shall not be saved, even if I do repent-then the thought would arise, if I am not elected, I never shall repent. This would cut him to the heart, and dash to the ground all his self-righteous hopes. For a long time he endured these conflicts in his mind. Meanwhile he became fully convinced, that the commands of God are perfectly just, that it was his immediate duty to repent, and that he had no excuse for continuing another moment a rebel against God.

At the same time he saw that such was the wickedness of his heart, that he never should repeat, unless God should subdue his heart by an act of sovereign grace. With these views of his condition, his distress was sometimes almost insupportable.-At one time he really supposed himself to be dying, and sinking into hell. This was the time of which he speaks in his narrative, when he says, "an unusual tremor seized all my limbs, and death appeared to have taken hold upon me." For several hours, his horror of mind was inexpressible.

Not long after this, there was a change in his feelings. He felt a calmness for which he knew not how to account. He thought, at first, that he had lost his convictions, and was going back to stupidity. This alarmed him, but still he could not recall his former feelings. A sweet peace pervaded his soul. The objects which had given him so much distress, he now contemplated with delight. He did not, however, for several days suppose that he had experienced a change of heart; but finding at length that his views and feelings accorded with those expressed by others whom he regarded as the friends of Christ, he began to think it possible that he might have passed from death unto life.

The more he examined himself, the more evidence he found that a great change had been wrought in his views and feelings respecting divine things. Old things had passed away-all things had become new. The character of God now appeared lovely. The Saviour was exceedingly precious; and the doctrines of grace, towards which he had felt such bitter opposition, be contemplated with delight. He had now no doubt of

their truth. He saw clearly that if there was any good thing in him towards the Lord God of Israel, it was not the result of any effort of his own, but of the sovereign and distinguished will of God.

He was ready to say with the Apostle, by the grace of God, I am what I am. He knew that if God had left him to himself, he should have persisted in the road to ruin. It was no longer a question with him, whether the natural heart is destitute of holiness, and opposed to God,-or whether it is necessary that the sinner should be born again by the special operations of the Holy Spirit. What the Scriptures teach on these points, was confirmed by his experience. He had the witness in himself of the truth of these doctrines.

And so firmly was he established in the belief of them, that his faith never wavered during his life. He now felt a peculiar love for the people of God, and a delight in the duties of religion, to which before he was a total stranger. If the reader would know the state of his mind at this period, let him read three or four of the Village Hymns, beginning with the 372, which were intended to describe the feelings of a young convert. He has been heard to say, that in arranging those hymns, he put those first which described his own feelings at the time of his conversion.

But although he enjoyed great peace of mind, he never expressed a very high degree of confidence that he was a child of God. He had such a deep and abiding sense of the deceitfulness of the human heart, and of the danger of self-deception, that not only at this period, but ever afterwards, he was exceedingly cautious in expressing his belief that he was accepted of God. At one time being asked, Whether he had any doubts respecting his interest in the promises, he replied, "I have no doubt that I have religious enjoyment; but the question is, whether it is of the right kind."

At another time he said, "the most that I have ventured to say respecting myself, is, that I think it possible I may get to heaven." It was always painful to him to hear persons express great confidence of their interest in the divine favor, unless they were persons of eminent piety. He feared they did not realize how deceitful the human heart is. It was about ten months, as has been already intimated, from the time when Mr. Nettleton's attention was first seriously turned to the subject of religion, before he obtained peace in believing.

With him what the old divines termed the law-work, was deep and thorough.-This protracted season of conviction gave him a knowledge of the human heart which few possess; and which was doubtless intended by God to prepare him for that pre-eminent success which attended his labors as a minister of Christ. As one observes, "God prepares for himself the souls which he destines to some important work. We must prepare the vessel before we launch it on the mighty deep. If education is necessary for every man, then is a particular education necessary for those who are to influence the generation in which they live."

The following remark of President Edwards in relation to the conversion of David Brainerd, will apply equally to the conversion of Mr. Nettleton. "His convictions of sin preceding his first consolations in Christ, were exceedingly deep and thorough. His trouble and sorrow arising from a sense of guilt and misery were very great, and long continued, but yet sound and rational, consisting in no unsteady, violent, and unaccountable frights and perturbations of the mind: but arising from the most serious consideration, and a clear illumination of the conscience to discern and consider the true state of things.

The light let into his mind at conversion, and the influences and exercises to which his mind was subject at that time appear very agreeable to reason, and to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The change was very great and remarkable, yet without any appearance of strong impressions on the imagination, or sudden flights of

tire affections, or vehement emotions of the animal nature. It was attended with just views of the supreme glory of the divine being, consisting in the infinite dignity and beauty of the perfection of his nature, and of the transcendent excellency of the way of salvation by Christ." The preceding is from a sermon at the funeral of Brainerd.

* Mr. Parmele became pastor of the church in Bolton, Conn. At his house Mr. Nettleton was sick with the Typhus fever in 1822. Mr. Parmele took the fever of him and died.

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