

Soltau , Henry Bio

by John Bjorlie

Henry Soltau's life was a testament to the power of faith and the impact of one person's ministry on the world.

Scripture: Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 3:7

Topics: "True Conversion", "Gods Grace"

Description

John Bjorlie preaches about the transformative power of encountering God's grace and the impact it has on one's life. He uses the life of Henry William Soltau as an example of how a personal encounter with Christ can lead to a radical change in priorities, from pursuing worldly pleasures to dedicating one's life to serving God and spreading His Word. Soltau's journey from a life of emptiness and superficial pursuits to becoming a prominent Bible teacher and elder in the church showcases the profound effect of true conversion and surrender to God's will.

Transcript

We are often told that right doctrine should have a practical effect. Henry William Soltau (1805-1875) lived to show us how that is done. He was the second son of George Soltau, a prosperous merchant of England's port city Plymouth. His father was a godly Anglican, and an energetic civic leader. He worked to establish the Plymouth Free School, where the Bible was taught as an elective, and while a member of the Town Council, George Soltau opposed the building of the theater. He died at age forty-four. From his death-bed he had a vision of all his six children reaching heaven. Henry's mother was a resolute, pious, caring woman and Henry was devoted to her.

When preparing to go to Cambridge, Henry studied under a private tutor, Samuel Wilberforce. This was the future Anglican Bishop Wilberforce, third son of the man who successfully campaigned to abolish the slave trade in the British empire--William Wilberforce. Entering Trinity College, in 1825, Henry took his degree in 1827.

In those years he often heard Charles Simeon and other popular evangelical preachers. But it seemed to him that "faith in the merits of Christ and doing one's duty" were so mingled that he never remembered hearing a clear presentation of the gospel preached. It was a period similar to our own when the evangelicals were so enmeshed in "cultural relevance" and "political reform" that Christ's agenda of rescuing individual souls from perishing in their sins was taking a sideline to social betterment. Henry did what he was told. He endeavored to "do what was right," observed formal religion, gave to charities, and read the Bible. But he had no peace.

He proceeded to study at Lincoln's Inn, and was afterwards called to the Chancery Bar. He read widely. Beside interest in the natural sciences, he studied Hebrew in order to understand the Old Testament. But his concerns for his soul's future seemed to be swallowed whole by the attractions of London society. He was a lawyer, "a Cambridge man," with wealth and influence in high places. We don't know that he was ever a gross or base sinner. He was fascinated by "innocent amusements." He loved the opera. He was attractive, and witty. His sparkle and charm made him a walking social event, and he could think too. But all that being said, Henry Soltau was empty without Christ.

By January, 1837, he had grown weary of his round of pleasure. A letter from home said his mother was not well, and when a second letter came, Soltau packed his large traveling bag. The letter was not alarmist, but somehow he felt that his mother was really dying and he would not see her alive. As the coach journey ended and he dismounted at Plymouth, his uncle was there to meet him with the news that it was over. Faced with a stinging loss, he went to his home like a man being taken to his execution. Falling to his knees in front of his dear mother's coffin that night, he prayed as if he had never truly prayed before, "Lord, if Thou dost not save me, I am lost for ever!"

There had been a courtroom incident God used to awaken Soltau, but I do not know any of the particulars. Shortly after his mother's passing he heard Captain Percy Hall speak on the four leprous men who sat outside the gate of Samaria in 2 Kings 7. Hall was a startling man. He had risen to the rank of Navy commander but resigned for conscientious reasons. He was a year older than Soltau. "Of a very independent temperament, the Captain did nothing by halves. He sold all his valuable possessions, and had everything in common with the poorer brethren (Acts 4:32). He had been a 'dandy' in his unregenerate days" so to show that fashion no longer ruled, he would purposely mess his hair and crumple his linen cuffs. At that time he was trekking through the region, preaching the gospel to the poor.

Hall led Soltau into the light of God's grace to bankrupt sinners. The change was so great that a relative said: "You are like the man in the third of Acts, walking and leaping and praising God."

When he returned to London with his "peculiar opinions" his old companions politely shunned him. He soon gave up his legal practice and moved to Plymouth with his sisters. There he discovered other Christians like Percy Hall. Later, in his booklet, *They Found it Written*, he enthused about this movement that "has no parallel in the whole history of the Church of God, because in no other instance has the Word of God (freed from all tradition) been taken as the guide of those who have sought a revival in the Church of God."

In leaving the Church of England, and casting in his lot in 1837 with the believers at Ebrington Street, like many others in the congregation, Soltau was cut off from most of his family. It was a big step, and a high price. Unshaken, he applied his study habits to the Scriptures and was soon occupied in gospel campaigns to out-of-the-way hamlets of western England.

The superstition and ignorance that prevailed in those places is described in George Brealey's biography, *Always Abounding*. Soltau went where sin abounded, and saw how grace did much more abound. Soltau's son said, "Multitudes were saved, and gathered around the Word of God. Schools were opened, and the Word of God had free course and was glorified." In 1838, Soltau and Mr. J. Clulow opened a printing and publishing company called the Bible and Tract Depot in Plymouth. They published *The Christian Witness* and quantities of literature were scattered abroad. It appears that in all the busyness of these days, Soltau was married.

Henry Soltau became a prominent Bible teacher and an elder in the growing Plymouth assembly. W. H. Cole described listening to him, "Mr. Soltau was the first, I think, who taught the meaning of the types and sacrifices of the Old Testament*, and as he unfolded the teaching of those symbols concerning the manifold perfection of the person and work of the Son of God, a peculiar awe brooded over the assembly, impelling to the silent worship of Him of whom he discoursed. The strain was solemn, calm and clear; his voice a deep tone, yet melodious, as it seemed almost to sing of salvation and the glories of the Saviour. He was withal a great preacher of righteousness."

Between 1845 and 1848, a severe period of testing came to the assembly in Plymouth. Perhaps the most upsetting to Soltau was to discover that for several years he had been working closely with and supporting (sometimes defending) B. W. Newton and then to discover that Newton was a heretic. Paul told us there must be factions, that those "which are approved" may be recognized (1 Cor. 11:19). It appears that the shakedown in Plymouth caused Soltau to believe that his influence had been nullified by his mistake.

After publishing a lengthy confession of his errors, Mr. and Mrs. Soltau moved to Exmouth, where they recuperated for three years from that morbid and unnerving time. In 1851, William Hake (R. C. Chapman's co-worker) offered Soltau a teaching position at the school in Bideford, where Hake was headmaster. The Soltaus then moved to nearby Northam, and continued there for ten wholesome years. One young man he tutored, William J. Lowe, would become an able Bible teacher and an assistant to John Darby in his translation work. Interestingly, Mrs. Soltau had not been scripturally baptized (believer's baptism had not been unanimously taught at the Plymouth assembly) so when three of the girls were converted, it was Robert Chapman who baptized Mrs. Soltau and the girls in the river that ran through Bideford.

In 1861, they moved to Exeter where Henry Soltau produced his books that did so much to open up the biblical teaching of the tabernacle in the wilderness, the priesthood and the Levitical offerings. His books are "must reading," and most books on the subject published in the last century are heavily indebted to Soltau. But the little book, *The Soul and Its Difficulties: a Word to the Anxious*, was the one that he liked to hear about. It had a large circulation, and when reports came of how it was used by God, Soltau rejoiced. When he could not travel for health reasons, he would hear that his little book was constantly on the move.

In 1860, he began losing his eyesight, and even feared total blindness, but he recovered somewhat, and was able to continue travelling alone and reading a Bible with large type.

Soltau visited London, speaking at the Freemasons' Hall; Glasgow, Birmingham, Hereford, Teignmouth, and Dublin. In Exeter in 1866, he met the evangelist, Samuel Blow, who said of Soltau's preaching, "As I listened, each word seemed to fall like a hammer, leaving a lasting impression...I frequently came across persons who had been converted while listening to him preaching in the open-air or at riverside baptisms."

By 1867, his health was caving in. That autumn he preached in London, and on the last Sunday spoke six times. One of those meetings was in the open air, in Soho Square, within sight of the places that a fashionable young lawyer spent his time thirty years ago. Soltau pointed to where that man had lived, then how he was converted, and how life has since been filled with happy service for God. Shortly after that day he was paralyzed by a stroke. He never spoke again publicly.

In 1870, he moved to Barnstaple to end his days near R. C. Chapman. When the end came, on the first of July, 1875, he had been unconscious for weeks, but at the last he lifted his head, his eyes opened, and the smile of heaven shone from his face. Without a sigh or gasp he made his exit.

In all, the Soltau's raised three sons and six daughters. All were converted at an early age, and later gave themselves to the Lord's service. He maintained an active interest in the Lord's work in the regions beyond, especially where his children worked. One was a leader in the M'Call Mission in France, Henrietta spent her life helping at the China Inland Mission headquarters in England. Son Henry went to Burma and China as a medical missionary and served with Hudson Taylor. Henry was also an honorary Secretary of CIM. All of them were a credit to their parents. Henry Soltau was a wise and tender father. What he taught in public he practiced at home, saying "First yourself; then the home; then the Church; then the world."

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