

# An Introduction to Charles G. Finney

by Robert Wurtz II

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*This sermon introduces the life and legacy of Charles G. Finney, emphasizing his revivalist heart and impactful methods of preaching.*

**Duration:** 33:49

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:105, Jeremiah 29:13, Matthew 5:3, Luke 18:13, Acts 17:27, Romans 10:10, 2 Corinthians 12:9

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the importance of feeling the weight of one's sin and the mindset that comes with it. He shares the story of Charles Finney, who had a revelation of his pride and felt a deep sense of repentance. Finney experienced a powerful encounter with God, where he wept with joy and love, confessing his sins and feeling a positive force entering his being. The preacher emphasizes the need for a personal encounter with God and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and highlights Finney's approach of preaching with conviction and making a compelling case for the teachings.

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## Transcript

...that I've entitled An Introduction to Charles G. Finney. When we talk about Brother Charles Finney and the legacy of revival that he left, there are very few that are like him that have come along really since the days of the apostles. And I think as we look to his life, there are a lot of things we can glean from him.

We can glean from him some of his methods, but more than that, I believe his heart and desire to see revival and to see lives changed and to see souls brought into the kingdom of God was great. And if we could glean that one thing, somehow by God's Spirit he could touch us and give us a similar desire to burn in our hearts the way that at one time it burned in his, I believe we've accomplished much. We're going to begin our study tonight starting out with From Birth Through Childhood.

From Birth Through Childhood. In the times of declension that have seized upon our nations throughout the centuries, God has always had a voice to raise up and call the people back to fear and to love their God. When the fires of passion for God die out and the candlestick of their anointing is near to be removed, God will start a fire.

Not just any fire, but one fire burning with the holy zeal that cries out, May I burn up for thee. See, Charles Gramson Finney was one such person. The fires of the great awakening lighted by the likes of Jonathan Edwards, John Whitfield, and John Wesley were dying down to a smoldering ember.

And the years of bygone revivals were losing their foothold and becoming a memory. And as these men would eventually go on to meet their Lord, God had his next yielded servant waiting in the wings. Praise the Lord.

You know, I'm thankful that God always has somebody waiting in the wings. He always has a root that he can raise up out of dry ground. Roughly a year had passed since the death of John Wesley.

And on August 29th, that would be 1792, Charles G. Finney was born in Warren, Connecticut, as a descendant of the New England Puritans. When he was about two years old, his father moved the family to Oneida County, New York. See, neither of his parents were religious, and among his neighbors there were very few religious people.

He seldom heard a sermon unless it was an occasional one from a traveling minister who was ill-equipped to teach the hearts of such a cold people. You see, there were very few Christian resources that he could even glean from. Brother Finney told in his biography the terrible ways in which sermons used to be delivered by those traveling preachers when he was a child.

See, the people would often go home. They would laugh at what he had said. But I doubt, and I believe that many of us would agree, that's ever read anything, any of his sermons that Brother Finney ever did, that anyone ever left laughing from any of his meetings.

You see, when the people had so lost their faith in the ministers of that day that they could laugh them to scorn, I believe it's time for revival, the years of learning. Just when a meeting house was built in Brother Finney's neighborhood, and a pastor had been brought in, his father moved the family again, this time, to the wilderness skirting the southern shore of Lake Ontario, here he lived for several years with no more exposure to Christianity than he had in Alameda County. When he was about 20 years old, he traveled to New Jersey, near New York City, where he worked as a teacher.

Charles Finney was primarily self-taught. He returned to New York, or New England rather, twice to attend high school. Brother Finney had a tutor.

He was from Yale University. He wanted to attend Yale himself, but the tutor had advised him that it would be a waste of time, that he could have completed four years worth of work or curriculum in just two years if he didn't go to the university. As a result of that, he ceased to pursue his education any further.

Charles Finney would later study Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but in his own words he said, I was never a classical scholar. The tutor wanted him to go and help run an academy in the southern states. He was about to accept the offer when he was informed of his parents that he had not seen for years.

They both immediately came after him. They convinced him that they would go with him back to Jefferson County, New York. Thus he became a student in the law office of Squire W. in Adams, Jefferson County.

That would be Squire Wright. This was in 1818. Charles Finney would have been 26 years old.

You know, I think about how many young Christians there are that already have a heart and a desire for God, and they're much younger than 26. I hear of ministers that are in their teens and others that are in their 20s, and I think, you know, Brother Charles Finney, at this young of an age, was still searching for God. What could we do with young people who already had a heart for God and was already pressing ahead? I believe God is raising up some in the likeness of Charles Finney in our day.

The searching years, the searching years. At this time, Brother Finney began to study at the law office of Squire Wright of Adams, near his old home in western New York. At Adams, while studying law, he attended the Presbyterian Church.

In his own words, he said that he knew about as much about Christianity as the heathen at that time. The pastor, George W. Gale, was an able and a highly educated man. His preaching gained the attention of Finney, although to his keen and logical mind, it seemed like a mass of absurdities and contradictions.

It was while studying law and attending church at Adams that Finney became interested in Bible study. I've read accounts where he would say that because it was actually in the... there were Bible references in the law books and things, that it caused him to be more and more interested in the Bible. He found many references in scripture.

He had many conversations with Pastor George Gale, but they would rarely agree on any point of doctrine. In his autobiography, Brother Finney writes, Pastor Gale was thoroughly Calvinistic. Whenever he came out with a doctrine, which he seldom did, he would preach what has been called hyper-Calvinism.

He was, of course, regarded as highly orthodox, but I didn't get much out of his preaching. As I sometimes told him, he seemed to begin in the middle and to assume many things that I thought needed to be proved. He seemed to take it for granted that the hearers were theologians and to assume they understood all the great fundamental doctrines of the gospel.

I must say that I was more perplexed, Brother Finney said, than helped by his preaching. When you read some of the methods of Brother Finney, and I hope to talk about this in our next study, but he had a belief that you needed to thoroughly convince the audience of what was being preached or taught. See, he didn't believe in using a language that was over the heads of the people.

He didn't believe it was important to come across to the people as though he had some great eloquent method of speaking. He wanted to get directly to the point, convey the message, and if he could do that, he'd seen it as success. And I believe we can learn a lot from that today.

So often we want to sound eloquent. So often we want to be able to sound articulate. But Brother Finney was not interested in that at all.

The thing that interested him was, was he able to make a compelling case for the teachings that he was making to the people. Of course, we know that he had a lot of studies in law and was even admitted into the bars, I understand, and wanted to be a lawyer early on, but God had other plans. But he never left that methodology, even in his preaching.

He always preached to the people as though he was trying to convince a jury of someone's guilt or innocence. I think that's interesting to note. There was something that Charles Finney noticed about the people at his church, and it was this, their prayers were never answered.

Until this time, he had never lived where he could attend a prayer meeting. He'd go to the prayer meetings, he would listen to the prayers, and when the prayers came not to be answered, he was troubled, and it made a bad impression on him in his search for Christianity at the time. Painfully honest at times, he has once asked of the people if they would like for them to pray for him.

But he said, no. He said, no. He said, you have prayed enough since I have attended these meetings to have prayed the devil out of Adams if there were any virtue in your prayers.

But here you are, praying on and complaining still. I thought that that was interesting. I thought that was interesting how that had such an effect on his life when he looked and seen that the prayers of the people were not answered.

And I think it again builds a great case that we need to walk with God and serve Him that our prayers would be answered. And in so doing, people could be compelled to recognize the truth of the gospel, even in that. But Brother Finney says clearly that it was almost a stumbling block for him that their prayers were not answered.

But in spite of all these things, in spite of all these things, he became more and more concerned about his own soul. He felt that if there was a life beyond the grave, he needed to be prepared for it and he was not. He continued on in his autobiography and he says, but as I read my Bible and attended the prayer meetings, heard Mr. Dale preach and spoke of him and others, I became very restless.

I became convinced that I was in no state to go to heaven if I had died. It seemed to me that there must be something in religion that was of infinite importance. And I decided that if the soul was immortal, I needed a great change inside me to make it into heaven.

But still my mind was not made up as to whether Christianity was even true or not. However, the question was too important to leave alone. I was particularly struck with the fact that the prayers I had listened to from week to week were not being answered that I could see.

And when I read my Bible, I learned that Christ had said about prayer and answers to prayer. He said, ask and you shall receive. Seek and you will find.

Knock and it will be opened to you. I also read what Christ said, that God is more willing to give this Holy Spirit to them that ask him than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children. I heard them pray continually for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and then confess that they did not receive what they had asked for.

I think about that a lot of times. I think about that. And you know, Brother Finney is absolutely right.

We need to get ourselves in a place to where when we pray, God will answer our prayer and God will hear it. We need to believe in faith. We need to pray out of a pure heart so God will hear our prayer.

We should not regard iniquity in our heart that the Lord would not hear us. And obviously there was something desperately wrong with these people's prayers. The day of salvation.

The day of salvation. Praise the Lord. On a Sunday evening in autumn of 1821, Charles Finney made up his mind that he would settle the question of his soul's salvation.

He began to focus entirely upon it. He consistently attended local prayer meetings and continued going to church while in Adams. Finney was always concerned that people would know that he was searching for salvation.

You see, he was embarrassed by his own admission. He was embarrassed for anyone to even think that he was seeking the Lord or maybe he wasn't saved. Finney was already concerned that people would

know he was searching.

When he prayed, at times he would whisper his prayers lest anyone would even hear him. In his own words, he confessed that he had been ashamed to even be seen or reading his Bible before his true conversion. Finally, after some number of days, conviction overtook him and he snuck off to the woods to seek the Lord, looking over his shoulder all the time as he went for fear that somebody might be following him.

The night before, he feared slipping into hell. If at once, he could likely die. He found a place to pray outside the town in the middle of some fallen trees.

You think about this scene for a minute. Here's Brother Finney going out, looking for a place to pray so nobody could see him. There were some trees that had fallen down in such a way that if he would get down in the very center of it and just duck down, it would be almost impossible for anyone to see him.

Charles Finney himself describes the scene. He says, I ducked in there. I knelt down to pray.

As I had turned to go up into the woods, I remember saying to myself, I will give my heart to God or I will never come down from here. I repeated this on my way up. I will give my heart to God before I ever come down again.

But when I attempted to pray, I found that my heart would not pray. I'd assumed that if I could not find a place where I could speak aloud without being overheard, I could pray freely. But when I came to try, I was dumb.

That is, I had nothing to say to God. I could only say a few words and those without heart. In attempting to pray, I would hear the rustling of the leaves and I would stop and I'd look up to see if someone was coming.

I did this several times. Finally, I found myself on the verge of despair. I said to myself, I cannot pray.

My heart is dead to God and will not pray. I was kicking myself for having promised to give my heart to God before I left the woods. When I came to try, I found I could not give my heart to God.

My inward soul hung back, he says, and there was no going out of my heart to God. I began to feel that it was too late, that God must have given up on me and I was past hope. I think about that.

You think about that for a minute. I remember when I came to the Lord. Back, I was a prodigal son, back in 1991.

I remember watching a passion play on Easter Sunday and looking up and as they raised the cross up with this man who was playing Jesus, he cried out, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And there was something different about me and I can so relate to what Brother Tenney is saying here. I didn't have to have someone to coerce me and say, Will you come and accept Christ? I had a different idea. I thought, you know, as much sin as I've committed, I wonder if the Lord will accept me, accept me back, to take me back.

See, it's a different mindset when you begin to feel the weight of your sin. It's a whole lot different story than so often we have to do and today trying to beg or even almost plead, you see a lot of times happening for people to come. Tenney said, I began to feel it was too late, that God must have given up

and I was past hope.

Charles Tenney had a revelation of his pride when he noticed himself always looking to see who might be watching him. Finally, at the top of the voice, he yelled out, I would not leave this place if all the men on earth and all the devils in hell had surrounded me. He continued, What, I said, such a degraded sinner as me, on my knees confessing my sins to a holy God and I'm ashamed to have any human being find me on my knees before him.

The sin appeared awful. It appeared infinite. It broke me down before the Lord.

Now I think about that. I heard somebody say with the same fanfare that you go out into sin, you need to come back into the kingdom of God repenting. And I believe that's true.

I think it was Spurgeon who made the statement that our repentance should be haughty and not timid. In other words, we shouldn't be ashamed that we're repenting. We should have the same zeal to repent as we had when we were in sin.

And I believe that's true. And I believe that's what Brother Finney is relaying here. Then the scriptures came to his mind.

You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all of your heart. He instantly took hold of this passage and trusted Christ. He had intellectually believed the Bible before, but now he was genuinely saved.

He continues, I was suddenly conscious of trusting at that moment in God's trustworthiness. Somehow I knew that that was a passage of scripture, though I did not think that I had ever read it. See, the Spirit of God had brought it to his mind.

I knew that it was God's word. I knew it was God's voice, as it were, that spoke to me. I cried to him, Lord, I take you at your word.

You know that I am searching for you with all of my heart, and that I have come here to pray to you, and you have promised to hear me. Praise the Lord. You know, I think about that.

And I think about when I came to the Lord. I think about that. You know, I believe what one person said is so often true.

It was a minister. It might even have been Ray Comfort who said, We give the proud the law to break them down, but in that brokenness we've got to give people grace. And that's the message that we need to realize.

Whenever we see people broken under their sins, we need to offer them grace. Give the law to the proud and give grace to the humble. I will preach the gospel.

I will preach the gospel. Charles Finney had prayed with such earnestness that he did not realize he was already headed out of the woods. The thought that he was actually transformed did not even occur to him.

He simply said to himself, If I am ever converted, I will preach the gospel. He would soon reach the road that led to the village and began thinking about what had just happened. He noticed that the mind and his heart that had just been tormented with feelings of conviction were quiet and peaceful.

He said to himself, What is this? What is this? He said, I must have grieved the Holy Spirit entirely away. I've lost all of my conviction. I don't have one bit of concern about my soul.

The Spirit must have left me. He continued, It seemed as though I had never been so unconcerned about my salvation in my life. Then I remembered what I had said to God while I was on my knees that I would take him at his word.

In fact, I remembered a whole lot of things that I had said and concluded that it was no wonder that the Spirit had left me. For such a sinner to take hold of God's word in that way must surely be presumption if not blasphemy. I concluded that in my excitement I had grieved the Holy Spirit and perhaps committed the unpardonable sin.

You think about a person who had so reached the Lord, they had so touched God, had so been transformed, the conviction totally left them. G. Frederick Wright, in his biography of Charles Finney, sums up the last hours, few hours rather, of his conversion. He writes, On returning to town he found that the whole forenoon had passed away but he had no appetite for dinner and instead of going back to his boarding house he went to his office where in the quiet of the noontide hour he took down his bass violin and he began to play and he sang some hymns with which in his impenitence he had so often led the worship of the congregation.

Every note, this time though, brought tears to his eyes. And after making several ineffectual attempts to suppress his feelings he put aside his music and he devoted himself during the afternoon to readjusting the books and furniture of the office having little conversation with any of the people who came in. As we read the final accounts of Finney's conversion we are left to ask ourselves if we can recall the hour in which we first believed.

Finney spoke of the glorious baptism in the Holy Spirit. Frederick continues, It was an experience that he was not looking for and of which he did not remember ever to have heard of. It seemed to him as if there was a positive force like electricity entering and penetrating his old system.

He wept aloud with joy and love and to use his own words literally bellowed out of unutterable gushings of his heart. So overwhelming were these waves of feeling that he cried out, Lord, I cannot bear it anymore. I shall die if these continue.

The joy that Finney felt did not leave but it was still fresh in the morning. You know, that's how we know somebody's really been converted. We know they're converted.

And so characterized the life. So characterized the life of this man who would become one of the great preachers of all times in America. Charles Finney is considered the father of modern revivalism with over 500,000 conversions resulting from his ministry.

Historians claim that in many ways Finney laid the well-paid robe for mass evangelists who would come after him, Dwight Moody, Billy Sundry, Billy Graham, and others. You know, praise the Lord. You know, I'm thankful for Brother Charles Finney.

There are a lot of things that I could say about him. I have a tremendous amount of material on his life. You know, he was a man of like passions and sufferings just as we are.

Did you know that he lost two infant children? He lost a child, I believe, at the age of two, a daughter, and another child at the age of eight. Before he had passed away, he had buried two wives. One passed away, and then 14 years later, after he had remarried, another one passed away.

He was acquainted with grief. And in the midst of all this sorrow and grief, you still see this man continuing on serving the Lord with all of the fervor that he had at first. I look at his life, and I'm inspired.

There are a lot of things about Brother Finney that really, really touch my heart and life. I don't know if you're familiar with this or not about him, but later on, he would go to teach at Oberlin College, I believe it was around 1830 or 1833 or so. The school opened up, had roughly 100 students.

Later, he would go to teach. He would teach there for some number of years, and would become the dean. I think he spent all total of about 40 years or so there at the age of 32 years old.

Just to kind of give you a few things here in my notes about Brother Finney. At the age of 32 years old, he was licensed to preach, and then he was commissioned to be a missionary. He was also married that same year.

He had all these things that happened while he was 32. But when he was 34 years old, he began preaching revival. He preached revival all of these years.

His first sermon, or one of the sermons that are really noted here in my notes, is Can Two Walk Together, Except They Be Agreed. He went on to, over many years, he had, I believe it was four children that survived, if I'm not mistaken, that survived and lived and grew up. As a matter of fact, he was quite a family man.

It wasn't just that he abandoned his family even after he had them. He continued on to make sure they were taken care of. If you go on to some of the records at Oberlin College, you can actually go in and read some of the letters that he had sent to his children while he was out of town preaching.

It just goes to show you that it's important not just that we reach the world, that we also reach our children. I heard a preacher say one time, he said, He said, Brother Finney had that in view many, many years before that quote was ever brought out. But there are a lot of things about Brother Finney that we could really go to and discuss.

I would recommend that you go through and certainly read his lectures on the Revival and read through them as we're doing the sermon readings. He's also got a lot of sermons that he had ministered. As a matter of fact, he's got an entire sermon on slavery that I've got.

He was big on seeing slavery done away with. You've got to understand that his ministry and a lot of the revivals took place prior to the Civil War that took place here in the United States. He was a man that was big on morality.

You read his theology and I mentioned it actually today in talking to someone there on the internet that my pastor and really a lot of our churches going all the way back in my family for many, many decades has had an Oberlin or a semi-type of Oberlin theology that they have lived their lives by and they were very much holiness and they were very big on holiness and I believe that these things were revived much by Brother Charles Finney. But as time began to pass him by, he lived a healthy life for the most part. At one time, he did contract cholera.

As a matter of fact, I think it was the same day that he took the church that took, I think, that may have even been his first church if I'm not mistaken. He took cholera and wasn't even able to minister right away. For anyone who knows anything about that disease, that's a pretty gruesome disease and God raised him up from that and he continued to go on and to serve the Lord and lived for many, many years serving God and he served Him very faithfully. I think even on Sermon Index you can find some pictures.

I even was able to track down some pictures if you'd like to hunt them down of the home where he was born and all these different things. There's a lot of information about Charles Finney if you want to do some personal research on your own. But I want to just basically close out tonight with some words from someone that had written at the Oberlin College by the name of Francis Hosford.

They wrote in July 1934 in the Oberlin Alumni Magazine of course. Brother Finney wrote a lot of articles that you can research and look at for the Oberlin Magazine or the magazine that they had and a lot of lectures they placed in there. But she wrote some words about the closing of his life that I'll share with you as we're closing up our introduction to his life.

She writes this. She says, His last day was Sunday, August 16th, 1875. The preacher had not been ill but his strength was failing and perhaps the family feared that the end was drawing near for all the Munro's come in the early evening for an hour in the old homestead.

Of course, any assemblage with Finney as its center would have included music and they sang hymn after hymn. Mother leading us, says Miss Stitch with her beautiful soprano. Finally the president, that being Brother Finney, sat down at the instrument and he played and he sang.

Then he walked the floor singing in a full strong voice. When they had gone, Miss Finney, this young Charles Chegan, a student of the Theological Seminary, to walk out with the president, Dr. Cregan, never knew whether Miss Finney had learned that the first church was to sing this hallelujah chorus. However this may be, the president heard it through the windows.

Open to the summer night and soon after his return home, he was seized with a terrible pain. You see the parallels between his life and that of the Apostle Paul can hardly have escaped the view of Charles Granson Finney. The youthful ambitions, the spectacular conversion, the utter renunciation and the devotion to the master, the journeys often to care of all the churches.

You see a lot of people didn't really care for Brother Finney. Even though he had a tremendous ministry, there were a lot of people that were not friendly to him. But he always seemed to treat them with kindness and with love.

She continues, she continues. He may have prayed that he too might be able to say, even as Paul the Apostle, when the time of his departure was at hand, that he had fought a good fight. And as he lay there struggling, mortal suffering, he gasped out these last words, I have kept the faith.

Wife, I have kept the faith. And then he passed on through the veil. You know, he left a legacy behind.

And I believe there's a lot that we can learn from Charles Granson Finney. I believe we can learn a lot about revival. I don't believe it's necessary to point to anyone's shortcomings who perhaps had done more to influence the church in which at least I attend, and the holiness circles, the likes of which, of course, were Whitfield and Wesley and others.

But Brother Finney certainly has his place among them. I appreciate God. I appreciate all God has done in my life.

I appreciate the lectures that he left behind, because they have thoroughly changed my life. I appreciate Sermon Index for them and for offering us the opportunity to come together. I appreciate Brother Grave, and I thank God for him and all that he is doing.

Can we end in closing prayer tonight? Heavenly Father, I just want to say, God, Lord, that we need revival in our land. God, I pray that somehow, Lord, that reading God some of these old works and learning about these old men and seeing some of their old methods, God, that really are not old, but, God, they are really fresh, Lord, in your heart. And, God, you can make them fresh in ours.

Lord, I pray today, God, that you would send revival in this land, that you would raise up people, God, both men and women, if so be it your will, God, to preach this message, God, a message of repentance and revival in our lands, God. Lord, I pray that we would preach without the fear or the favor, God, that we would not seek to be eloquent, Lord, or we would not seek to have favor with the people, but, God, we would speak what you would say to us. And, God, I just pray for our nation, I pray for our land, I pray for our churches, and I pray for Sermon Index, God.

Use it, Lord, as a mighty weapon in your hand. God, again, we pray that you would protect Brother Greg, protect, God, the servers, protect everything that needs to be protected, God, that your word could go out. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen.

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