

a community called ...

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THE
MISSIONARY CALL.

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WHEN I was in my eighteenth year a little book, entitled "Early Piety," fell into my hands, and was read with some interest. It consisted of two sermons by Dr. Olin, both addressed to young men, and both containing pointed appeals to the conscience and reason of those addressed. I was teaching a country school at this time, and one day during the children's play-hour had walked out into the warm autumn sunshine, and was leisurely

reading one of these sermons, when I came upon the following passage :

“The middle-aged pastor will generally be found unfit for the new duties and ideas of missionary life. The young man, on the other hand, has nothing to unlearn. He is pliable and plastic, ready to be molded into any form of physical and mental activity which the exigencies of the times may demand. . . . Several of our great benevolent enterprises, which are rapidly extending their influence to the remotest nations of the earth, were projected by young men while they were still under-graduates ; and Mills and Judson and Newell passed immediately from the schools into the distant lands where they laid the foundations of Christian empires.”

Up to this hour I had never thought of being a missionary, or felt any interest in missionary work, but as I read the above words there flashed upon my mind and heart a clear impression that my life-work would be in the missionary field. It did not occur to me that I was needed there, or that I

could do a good or great work there, or that I should like such a life, but simply there came to me an undefinable and yet clear conviction that this was God's choice concerning me, and that soon or later he would lead me forth into the work for which he had chosen me. There was nothing pleasing in the thought of such a life, and I would have dismissed the whole matter from my mind in a moment had I been able to do so. But the conviction did not come at my bidding, and was not to be shaken off as a passing fancy.

At this time I was not enjoying the witness of the Spirit, and had not been converted, in the proper sense of that word. I was a communicant in the Church, and in a sense a servant of God, but had not received the adoption of sonship, and knew nothing whatever by personal experience of the meaning of spiritual communion, or the Spirit's guidance. Eighteen months later I found Christ, and began to live the life of Christian discipleship. The call, however, had followed me, and when I began to understand what it was to talk with

God, and walk in the fellowship of his Son Jesus, the only change I noticed in reference to this conviction was that it seemed to become more deeply rooted and to come more distinctly and frequently before my mind. And yet I was not at any time sure that I was interpreting the conviction aright. I thought—perhaps I ought to say hoped—that it would turn out in the end to be nothing more than a test of obedience put before me, and that I would never have to leave either friends or country.

Two years after my conversion I began to preach. By a very slow and cautious process of prayer, reflection, and observation of special indications of Providence, I had reached a settled conviction that I should become a messenger of Jesus Christ to men. While pondering this wider question the more specific duty of going into the mission field was constantly thrusting itself upon me. At times it assumed the form of a powerful conviction which demanded immediate attention and obedience; but a feeling of honest cau-

tiousness rather than of disobedience kept me from accepting the call and letting the matter be settled once for all. When I began to preach I soon began to feel the need of a clear and definite call to that work. I had conscientiously come to the conclusion that God would have me preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ; but when I seemed to preach in vain, when people listened and yet did not seem to hear, and when no tangible result appeared in any quarter, I began to feel that life under such conditions would be insupportable. One afternoon, during a series of meetings in Marlborough, Ohio, I went out into the woods near the village, and, kneeling alone among the branches of a fallen maple-tree, I talked the matter all over with my Saviour, and there alone with him I received my clear and distinct commission to go and preach his Gospel to dying men. I heard no words, but the commission could not have been more specific and clear had the visible Son of God said to me, "Go, preach my Gospel." From that hour I could preach with or without vis-

ible results. A foundation of adamant had glided under my feet, and I knew for whom I was to speak, and what the message was with which I had been intrusted:

A busy year passed without any change occurring in my inner feelings, or in the outward indications of God's will in reference to my call to missionary work. In a general way I still looked forward to the possibility of becoming a missionary, but I had received no definite call in such a way as to make the matter a question of personal duty. I saw no special pathway marked out in which I was to walk. I had often thought of going to foreign lands, particularly to South America, and had even thought of Africa as my future home, but had never once thought it probable that I might be sent to India. So far from this, I had a singular aversion to India, felt no interest in any thing connected with the country, and seemed to shrink from the very thought of missionary work in that land. The summer of my second year in the work of preaching was drawing to a close. I

had met with abundant outward tokens of God's approval, and was exceedingly happy in my work and the prospects before me, when like a shadow from an invisible cloud there began to flit across my heart a misgiving that my work in Ohio was nearly over, that my call to missionary work was soon to be brought to a definite issue, and that the field of my future labor was to be India. How this definite and disquieting conviction began I cannot tell. I never could recall its origin, or tell how it had taken possession of my mind. I only knew that the issue was at last being forced upon me, and must soon be decided definitely for all time to come. One day I came in from the post-office and sat down alone to read "The Christian Advocate and Journal," at that time edited by Dr. Abel Stevens. The leading editorial was an appeal to the young men of the Church, and it closed with a statement that six young men were urgently needed for India, and asked where they were to be found. I was powerfully moved by the appeal, not so much by

any thing it contained as by a strong impression that I ought to be one of the six young men to go forth in the response to the call. I dropped the paper and fell upon my knees, and promised God that I would accept the call if only he would make it clear that he sent me. I asked for some token, for some definite indication, that I was called from above, not only in a general way to become a missionary, but to that special field, and at that special time. I had not long to wait for an answer.

Strangely enough I had not, up to this time, sought counsel from any Christian friend. I had barely mentioned the fact, on two or three occasions in the course of two or three years, that I had more or less of a conviction that I should become a missionary, but for reasons which I did not then understand I felt averse to speaking to intimate friends on the subject. This inclination to reticence became stronger as my convictions became deeper, probably for the reason that there is a certain sacredness about the very deepest

feelings of the heart which makes us at times shrink from all outward observation. Much that the Spirit reveals to us we feel at once like telling to the world, but there are times when the closet door is shut, when the soul gains an audience on the mount, and when the whispers from the overshadowing cloud seem to conclude with a command to tell the vision to no man till God's time for doing so shall have fully come. I had thus far felt more and more like keeping silence about the matter, but now a point was reached where I felt that I must speak; I might be mistaking my own convictions. I had promised to obey the voice of the Church, and if God spoke to me directly he would also speak to me through the Church. If he were to bid me go, and at the same time bid the Church to send me, the latter call would be a strong confirmation of the former. My presiding elder was the immediate channel of authority through which I received the commands of the Church, and hence I resolved to seek his advice. If he thought favorably of the mat-

ter I would take further steps, but if he disapproved of it I would pause and wait for more light; or, possibly, dismiss the subject from my mind altogether.

I was at this time junior preacher on the Marlborough Circuit, in the Pittsburg Conference, which at the time included southeastern Ohio. My colleague was the Rev. R. Morrow, and my presiding elder the late Rev. D. P. Mitchell, of Kansas. It chanced that the latter had an engagement to preach at this time in the little village of New Harrisburg, on our circuit, and I determined to lay the whole matter before him and seek his advice. He came in at an early hour, having ridden on horseback from the nearest railroad station, and met me at the house of Brother Peter Keener, a cabinet-maker, who was one of the few members which we had in that French settlement. Keener's house was one of my familiar stopping-places, and at the head of the stair-way there was a tiny little room, barely large enough to contain a bed, a chair, a table, and

a candlestick, where I had often slept when on my weekly rounds on the circuit. It was a snowy morning, and the presiding elder was sitting with his feet to the stove, which stood in the cozy little room below, when he remarked:

“I met Bishop Janes on the train this morning.”

“Bishop Janes!” I replied. “What can he be doing out here?”

“He is on his way West, looking for missionaries for India. He wants six immediately.”

My heart leaped into my throat, but before I could say any thing the elder continued:

“James, how would *you* like to go?”

“It is very singular,” I said, “but I have come here with the special purpose of asking your advice about going to India.”

“Well, I must tell you that you have been in my mind all morning. I incline to think you ought to go. I have felt so ever since the Bishop told me his errand.”

I went up stairs to the little prophet-

chamber and knelt down to seek for guidance from above, but I could not pray. God poured his Spirit upon me from on high, and my heart so overflowed with a hallowed feeling of love and joy that I could not utter a word. Before I could ask, God had answered. It was not so much a call to India that I received as an acceptance for India. I did not receive any message, or realize any new conviction, or come down from my sacred audience with God feeling that the matter was forever settled, and yet that hour stands out in my life as the burning bush must have stood in the memory of Moses. It was my burning bush. It has followed me through all the years which have passed like a divine Presence, and a hundred times when wearied and oppressed with doubts and discouragements have I fallen on my knees and pleaded with God, by the hallowed memories of that hour of blessing, to prove faithful to the promise of his love and care which was then burned into my very soul. It has been one long inspiration, an un failing source of

strength and courage, when these virtues seemed about to fail.

Practically, the question of my going to India was settled when I came down from that little room, but I knew it not. I must have my name submitted to the Bishops and Missionary Secretary, and I was not sure that they would appoint me. Then I knew that the time had come when the matter must be submitted to relatives, and hinderances might arise from unexpected quarters. I arranged with my presiding elder to see Bishop Simpson and submit my case to him, and then sat down and wrote my mother and brothers and sisters, telling them of my call, and intimating an early visit to talk the matter over. I followed my letters a week later, and found, as I had anticipated, that the proposal was very unwelcome to nearly every one in the family circle. My widowed mother was beginning to feel the infirmities of age, and every one assured me that her consent to my going could never be obtained. I had anticipated as much, and was not surprised when told

that she had said that she never could consent to let me go. But when God undertakes to open one's way he can fully accomplish the task. When I began to talk the matter over with her she spoke to me, in substance, as follows:

“I crossed the ocean in the hope of finding a home around which all my children might be gathered; and at first I felt that I could not consent to see you go to the other side of the globe to spend all your days. But some days before your letter came God began to prepare me for a great trial. Each night as I lay down to sleep a strange peace would fill my heart, and I would become so happy that I could hardly restrain myself. Something made me understand that the meaning of this was that God was preparing me for a great trial, and on every occasion I had a clear impression that in some way the trial would be connected with you. I understand it all now. I feel as if I could not bid you go; but I cannot bid you stay. It is of God, and I cannot doubt it.”

Here I saw one confirmation following another, and every day it became clearer that God was making my way plain before me. I still, however, hesitated to dismiss all doubts and formally and finally determine to go; till New Year's day, 1859, when I went out alone among the familiar trees of the forest, and after weighing all the evidences and thinking over all the issues involved and praying to be kept from any mistake, I finally consecrated myself to God and the Church for service in India.

It is not to be expected that every one who is chosen of God for missionary service will receive a call like the above, and yet it ought to be said that every missionary sorely needs the sustaining power of a supreme conviction that he is called of God to the work in which he is engaged. The call of Moses was more sublime than that of Elisha, but not more real. It matters not *how* God may speak to those whom he would make his messengers, but the messenger ought to be sure that he is sent of God, and that he goes forth author-

ized to speak for Jehovah. Here and there a missionary may be found who has sought and found a commission from above after reaching his field of labor; here and there others may be found who do fairly faithful work without being conscious of a call; but in most cases where young men go out to grapple with the tremendous forces of error and sin in the heathen world, unsupported by the divine command, they either seek an early release from their posts or remain through years of dull and listless labor, occupying, but not filling, positions for which God's true messengers alone are fitted. Speaking from personal experience, I have no hesitation whatever in confessing that I must long ago have given up the work had it not been that I felt perfectly sure that I was in the place to which God had sent me, and engaged in the work which he had given me to do.

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