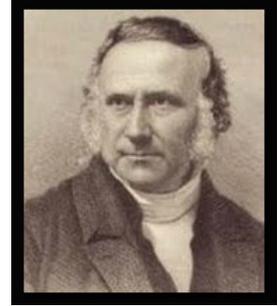


# *The Last Hour*



One of the most distressing instances of religious darkness and despondency, that I have ever been called to witness, was that of a poor girl, whom I first knew when I was called upon to visit her in her last sickness. She was not twenty years old, her health had departed, she seemed to be doomed to an early grave. A seated pulmonary affection deprived her of all hope of recovery, and she had no hope in God. From her earliest childhood she had had excellent religious instruction. Her parents were pious people, and though they were poor, they had carefully educated her. She had been a scholar in the Sabbath school from her childhood, under the weekly instructions of a teacher who loved her, and who had taught her with assiduity, kindness, and skill. But though she had been long the subject of religious impressions, and had carefully studied her Bible, and earnestly prayed to be directed into the path of life, she had never found peace with God.

When I first knew her, none but herself had any special fears that her life was near its end. She was then able to be about the house, and sometimes, in pleasant weather, to walk out into the fields. But she had given up all expectation that she should recover, and she now addressed herself to the work of preparation for death, to which she looked forward with an indescribable anguish. She regarded it as the commencement of eternal woe.

At first I felt no peculiar discouragement, on account of her religious depression. I regarded her fearful distress of mind, as only the natural accompaniment of a just conviction of sin, and confidently

expected that she would soon be led to hope and peace in believing. But it was far otherwise with her. She attained no peace. As week passed after week, she continued in the same despondency, receiving no light, no hope, no comfort. She read, she examined, she wept, she prayed in vain. And as her health declined more and more, her mind became wrought up to an intensity of anguish most distressful to witness. It was enough to melt any one's heart, to hear her cries for mercy. Never did a sinner plead more earnestly to be delivered from going down to perdition. She cried for mercy, as if standing in the very sight of hell! She had not a single gleam of light. Her soul was dark as a double midnight, and seemed plunged into an ocean of horrors. No one, I am sure, could have listened to her dreadful wailings, without feeling a sympathy with her, which would have wrung the heart with anguish.

I visited her often, conversed with her many times, taught her most carefully all the truths of the Bible, which I supposed could possibly have any tendency to awaken her faith in Christ, and prepare her to meet Him; but I never had any evidence to the last, that anything I ever said to her was the means of any benefit.

I wondered at her continued despair. It seemed to be the more remarkable, on account of the clear views which she appeared to have, of the character of God, of His holy law, of her condemnation by it, of her wicked heart, of redemption by Christ, and of the faithfulness of God to fulfil all his promises. I often examined her thoughts and feelings on all such points as well as I could, in order to detect any error into which she might have fallen, and which might be a hindrance to her faith and peace, and in order to persuade her to trust all her eternal interests to the grace of the great Redeemer. She had not a doubt about any of these truths. She knew and bewailed her guiltiness and depravity, she fully believed in the love of God towards Sinners, and the willingness of Christ to save her, unworthy as she was; she said she hated sin with all her heart; she longed to be holy; she did not believe that she hated God, though she would not say that she loved Him; she admired "the kindness and love of

God our Saviour” towards sinners; and wanted, above all things, to have an interest in His redemption, and be sure that He had accepted her.

:Months before her death I believed that she was a child of God. I thought I could discover every evidence of it, except hope, and peace, and the spirit of adoption. She had now come to believe that she had some love to God; “but,” says she, “I am afraid God does not love me, and will cast me off forever, as I deserve.” I strove, in every possible manner, and time after time, to lead her to the peace of faith. By holding directly before her mind the character of God, the redeeming kindness and work of Christ, and especially God’s free invitations and firm promises; I strove to lead her to an appropriating faith, which should beguile her into a half-forgetfulness of herself, by causing her to delight in God. By teaching her according to the Scriptures what are the evidences of a new heart, and then by taking her own declarations to demonstrate to her that her own exercises of mind and heart were precisely these evidences; I labored hard to induce her mind to rest upon the “witness within.”—a witness really there (as I believed), if she would only hear and heed its voice. I explained to her what I honestly supposed to be the cause of her darkness, that is, her bodily condition, which prevented her seeing things as they were, by throwing a deceptive and dismal cloud over everything that pertained to herself. At times, when she appeared to me to be coming out of her gloom, and to be standing on the very borders of a light which she could not but see; a single recurring idea about herself would fling her back into all her darkness, and she would weep and wail in despair.

I had been describing heaven to her, and referring to its song of redemption, ‘who loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,’—

“Others will be in heaven,” said she, “but I shall be cast out! From the distant region of my doom, I shall behold my companions by the river of life, happy, happy spirits, perhaps I shall hear their song; but no such home for me!”

“How came they there?” said I. “They were not saved by their goodness. They were no better than you. Jesus Christ saved them by his blood, and he offers to save you.”

“He passes me by, sir. He called them, and they obeyed the call in due time; but he does not call me!”

“He does, my child, He does. He calls you now, ‘Come unto me.’”

“If He does, sir, I have no heart to hear Him! My day is past! my day is past! I shall be cast off as I deserve! Oh, I wish I had never been born!”

“Your day is not past. ‘Now is the day of salvation.’”

Her only answer was tears and groans.

Such was her melancholy condition, as she declined more and more. Her strength was now almost gone. She evidently had but few weeks to live, if indeed a few days even remained to be measured by the falling sands of her life.

One day, (some weeks before her death,) after I had been stating to her the evidences of a regenerated state, and she had clearly described to me her own views and feelings, which seemed to me to accord with these evidences in one particular after another almost throughout the entire chapter; I said to her, with some earnestness,—

“Mary Ann, what do you want more, to convince you that you are a child of God? What do you expect? If these things do not convince you, what could? What evidence more do you want? Do you want an angel to come down from heaven here to your bedside, to tell you that you are a Christian, and shall go to heaven as soon as you die?”

“Oh, yes,” said she, in a transport of emotion, clasping her death-pale hands, “that is just what I want—just what I want.”

“That is just what you cannot have,” said I; “God is not going to give you any such kind of evidence.”

I then explained to her, how she must rest upon spiritual evidences, as all Christians do, and not on any evidence of the senses, or supernatural occurrence outside of her own heart.

As she approached fast her end, and evidently could not survive much longer; I was greatly disappointed and saddened, that her mind

continued in the same unbroken gloom. I had not expected it. I had looked for a different experience. But it now seemed that her sun must go down in clouds!

One Sabbath morning, just before the time of public service, I was sent for to “see her die.” She could still speak, in a very clear and intelligible manner, better than for weeks before. Her reason was continued to her, all her faculties appeared as unimpaired and bright as ever. All that I could discover of any alteration in her mind, appeared to me to consist simply in this,—she now thought of herself less, and of her God and Saviour more. I told her, as I was requested to do, that she was now very soon to die. The bell was tolling for me to go to the pulpit, and, having prayed with her, commending her to her God, I gave her my hand to bid her farewell. “Will you come to see me at noon?” says she.

“My dear child, you cannot live till noon. The Doctor says you cannot live half an hour. I will come here as soon as I leave the church.”

I went to the church and preached; and as soon as the service closed, I went immediately to her house. She was still alive. One of her friends met me at the door, and hastily told me, that soon after I left the house, an hour and a half before, she avowed her perfect trust in Christ, and her firm confidence that He would “take her home to heaven.” “I am full of peace,” said she, “I can trust my God. This is enough. I am happy, happy. I die happy.” A little while after, she said she wanted to see me “once more.” She was told I was in church, and that she could not live till the sermon was closed. “I shall live,” said she firmly. She seemed to refuse to die. She inquired what time the service would close, and being told, she often afterwards inquired what time it was. She watched the hands of the clock, frequently turning her eyes upon them, in the intervals between her prayers and praises and rapturous thanksgivings. As I entered the room she turned her eyes upon me; “Oh,” says she, “I am glad you have come; I have been waiting for you. I wanted to see you once more, and tell you how happy I am. I have found out that a poor sinner has nothing to do only to believe. I am not afraid of death now. I am willing to die. God has forgiven me, and I die happy,—I am very happy. I wanted to tell

you this. I thought I should live long enough to tell you. I thought God would not let me die till I had seen you, and told you of my joy, so as not to have you discouraged when you meet with other persons who have such dark minds as mine was. Tell them to seek the Saviour. Light will come some time, if it is at the last hour. I prayed God to let me see you once more. He has granted my last prayer; and now—now I am ready.”

Her voice faltered; she could say no more. I prayed some two or three minutes by her bedside; we rose from our knees, and in less than five minutes more she was dead. ‘Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.’

It was pleasant to hear this dying girl affirm her faith, and to witness her joy at the moment of death. But I do not know that this joy amounted to any more real evidence of her effectual calling to Christ by the Holy Spirit than she had presented before. Faith is one thing, and feeling is another. It is the faith that saves. It is the feeling that comforts. But the faith may exist where the feeling is wanting. The principle may exist where its action is wanting.

If this poor girl had died in all her darkness and fears, I should not have despaired of her. Amid all her glooms of guilt, I thought she exhibited proofs of faith. It seemed to me that it was faith, which made her attend to the truths of the Bible, with such careful scrutiny and enduring perseverance, at the very moment when she saw no light in it for her;—that it was faith, which made her pray so fervently and without faltering, month after month, at the very time when she did not suppose she received any answer;—that it was faith, which kept her, in her most gloomy times, perfectly free from any besetting doubt that there is salvation for sinners in Jesus Christ, freely offered to them in the love of God;—that it was faith, which made her so perfectly assured that peace with God is attainable, and made her long for it as the only thing she cared for;—yea, that it was faith, which gave to her very glooms their most terrible aspect, creating such a confluent and continue conviction that if Christ was not found, everything was lost. Her grief was not that of an alien and an enemy, but that of an affectionate, but disinherited child.

The very point of her anguish consisted in this,—namely, that she believed Christ to be a full and free Saviour, and yet could find no evidence in her heart that she trusted in Him. The promises were precious things in her heart's estimation, but they seemed to her to be precious things which she did not embrace. She distrusted herself, but not God. She was afraid to believe that she was a believer. She was so tremblingly afraid of getting wrong, that she dared not think she could possibly be right. On this ground, I was led to believe that Mary Ann was a child of God, long before that memorable light shone on her soul in the hour of death. She was in darkness, not because she had no faith, but because she did not believe she had any. She had a title to heaven, without having eyes to read it.

Her mother, father, and physician, (who was a pious man), all her friends, as I suppose, regarded this bright close of her earthly experience very differently from myself. They appeared to look upon it as the commencement of her faith, thinking that God had first appeared for her in that time of her first triumph and joy. Such an idea in similar cases, I suppose, to be common, and I suppose it to be an error, and a very misleading one, especially to many unconverted sinners. Such unconverted sinners hear of instances like this, and, therefore, hope that it may be just so with themselves, when they shall be called to die. On the ground of this hope, they speak a deceitful peace to their own hearts, without any definite, determined, and prayerful efforts to prepare for death,—just leaving it to that coming hour itself to bring along with it the preparation they need. Their secret thought is,—such a one, who always lived without religion, died in peace at last, and why should not I? Delusive thought, and often fatal! These persons never stop to inquire what had been the previous heart-history, the struggles, and prayers of those, whose peaceful death they mention. They themselves are not living such a life as their now departed acquaintance did, who died in peace; and, therefore, they have no good reason to think they shall die such a death. Too hastily they say of such a one, “he lived all his life without religion.” They say what they do not know, and what probably is false. If

anyone would hope to die like Mary Ann, let him live like Mary Ann. Her supreme aim, and her agonizing prayer for months, sought the favor of God. To gain this, she omitted nothing which she deemed a duty,—she deferred nothing to a future hour. To gain this was all her desire, and no discouragement could make her falter, or turn her aside. ‘Go thou and do likewise,’ if thou wouldst die like Mary Ann.