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978-1-108-01190-7 - Life of the Rev. David Brainerd: Missionary to the North American Indians

Josiah Pratt and Jonathan Edwards

Excerpt

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LIFE OF DAVID BRAINERD.

CHAPTER I.

From his Birth to his entrance at College.

ELIOT, in the West, and Schwartz, in the East, have ennobled the name of Missionary; and have displayed, in the latter days of the church, the virtues of the apostolic age. DAVID BRAINERD is worthy to rank with these distinguished men. He did not, indeed, survive, like his brethren, to a good old age. His course was short, but laborious and successful. Entering, in his twenty-fifth year, on nearly the same field of labour which Eliot had first broken up about a century before, he departed to his rest in his thirtieth, young in years, but rich in graces.

He was born April 20, 1718, at Haddam, in Connecticut. His father, who died when his son was about nine years of age, was one of his Majesty's council for that colony. His mother was Mrs. Do-

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rothy Hobart, daughter of the Rev. Jeremiah Hobart, of Haddam.

He was the third son of his parents, who had five sons and four daughters. Mrs. Dorothy Brainerd, having lived several years a widow, died when her son David was about fourteen years of age. Deprived thus early of both his parents, their anxious care of him was not lost. The seed soon sprang up and flourished with vigour during his few surviving years.

At a very early age he had strong impressions on his mind of the importance of religion, and was agitated by the fear of death. This fear impelled him to the private duties of religion; but they were an irksome task to him.

The progress of his mind, at this period of his history, may be given in his own words.

‘ I was, I think, from my youth, something sober, and inclined rather to melancholy than the contrary extreme; but do not remember any thing of conviction of sin worthy of remark, till I was, I believe, about seven or eight years of age; when I became something concerned for my soul, and terrified at the thoughts of death, and was driven to the performance of duties: but it appeared a melancholy business, and destroyed my eagerness for play. And, alas! this religious concern was but short-lived. However, I sometimes attended secret prayer; and thus lived at “ ease in Zion, without God in the world,” and without much concern, as I remember, till I was above thirteen years of age. But some time in the winter of 1732, I was something roused out of carnal security, by I scarce know what means at first; but was much

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excited by the prevailing of a mortal sickness in Haddam. I was frequent, constant, and something fervent in duties, and took delight in reading, especially Mr. Janeway's Token for Children. I felt sometimes much melted in duties, and took great delight in the performance of them; and I sometimes hoped that I was converted, or at least in a good and hopeful way for heaven and happiness, not knowing what conversion was. The Spirit of God at this time proceeded far with me; I was remarkably dead to the world, and my thoughts were almost wholly employed about my soul's concerns; and I may indeed say, "Almost I was persuaded to be a Christian." I was also exceedingly distressed and melancholy at the death of my mother, in March 1732. But afterwards my religious concern began to decline, and I by degrees fell back into a considerable degree of security, though I still attended secret prayer frequently.

' About the 15th of April, 1733, I removed from my father's house to East Haddam, where I spent four years, but still "without God in the world;" though, for the most part, I went a round of secret duty. I was not exceedingly addicted to young company, or frolicking, as it is called. But this I know, that when I did go into company, I never returned from a frolic in my life with so good a conscience as I went with; it always added new guilt to me, and made me afraid to come to the throne of grace, and spoiled those good frames I was wont sometimes to please myself with. But, alas! all my good frames were but self-righteousness, not bottomed on a desire for the glory of God.

' About the latter end of April, 1737, being full

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nineteen years of age, I removed to Durham, and began to work on my farm, and so continued the year out, or nearly, till I was twenty years old ; frequently longing, from a natural inclination, after a liberal education. When I was about twenty years of age, I applied myself to study ; and, sometime before, was more than ordinarily excited to, and in duty : but now engaged more than ever in the duties of religion. I became very strict and watchful over my thoughts, words, and actions ; and thought I must be sober indeed, because I designed to devote myself to the ministry ; and imagined I did dedicate myself to the Lord.

‘ Some time in April, 1738, I went to Mr. Fiske’s, the pastor of the church at Haddam, and lived with him during his life. And I remember he advised me wholly to abandon young company, and associate myself with grave, elderly people : which counsel I followed ; and my manner of life was now exceeding regular, and full of religion, such as it was : for I read my Bible more than twice through in less than a year ; I spent much time, every day, in secret prayer and other secret duties ; I gave great attention to the word preached, and endeavoured to my utmost to retain it. So much concerned was I about religion, that I agreed with some young persons to meet privately on Sabbath evenings for religious exercises, and thought myself sincere in these duties ; and, after our meeting was ended, I used to repeat the discourses of the day to myself, and recollect what I could, though sometimes it was very late in the night. Again, on Monday mornings I used sometimes to recollect the same sermons. And I had sometimes considerable movings of affections

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in duties, and much pleasure, and had many thoughts of joining the church. In short, I had a very good outside, and rested entirely on my duties, though I was not sensible of it.

‘After Mr. Fiske’s death, I proceeded in my learning with my brother; and was still very constant in religious duties, and often wondered at the levity of professors: it was a trouble to me that they were so careless in religious matters. Thus I proceeded a considerable length on a self-righteous foundation; and should have been entirely lost and undone, had not the mere mercy of God prevented.

‘Some time in the beginning of winter, 1738, it pleased God, on one Sabbath-day morning, as I was walking out for some secret duties, as I remember, to give me on a sudden such a sense of my danger and of the wrath of God, that I stood amazed, and my former good frames, that I had pleased myself with, all presently vanished; and from the view that I had of my sin and vileness, I was much distressed all that day, fearing the vengeance of God would soon overtake me; I was much dejected, and kept much alone, and sometimes begrudged the birds and beasts their happiness, because they were not exposed to eternal misery, as I evidently saw I was. And thus I lived from day to day, being frequently in great distress: sometimes there appeared mountains before me to obstruct my hopes of mercy; and the work of conversion appeared so great, I thought I should never be the subject of it: but used, however, to pray and cry to God, and perform other duties with great earnestness, and hoped by some means to make the case better. And though I, hundreds of times, renounced all pretences of any worth in my

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duties, as I thought, even in the season of the performance of them, and often confessed to God that I deserved nothing for the very best of them, but eternal condemnation; yet still I had a secret latent hope of recommending myself to God by my religious duties; and when I prayed affectionately, and my heart seemed in some measure to melt, I hoped God would be thereby moved to pity me, my prayers then looked with some appearance of goodness in them, and I seemed to mourn for sin: and then I could, in some measure, venture on the mercy of God in Christ, as I thought; though the preponderating thought and foundation of my hope was some imagination of goodness in my heart-meltings, and flowing of affections in duty, and sometimes extraordinary enlargements therein.

‘Sometime in February, 1738-9, I set apart a day for secret fasting and prayer, and spent the day in almost incessant cries to God for mercy, that he would open my eyes to see the evil of sin, and the way of life by Jesus Christ. And God was pleased that day to make considerable discoveries of my heart to me. But still I trusted in all the duties I performed, though there was no manner of goodness in the duties I then performed, there being no manner of respect to the glory of God in them, nor any such principle in my heart; yet God was pleased to make my endeavours that day a means to show me my helplessness in some measure.

‘Sometimes I was greatly encouraged, and imagined that God loved me, and was pleased with me, and thought I should soon be fully reconciled to God; while the whole was founded on mere presumption, arising from enlargement in duty, or

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flowing of affections, or some good resolutions, and the like. And when, at times, great distress began to arise, on a sight of my vileness, and nakedness, and inability to deliver myself from a sovereign God, I used to put off the discovery, as what I could not bear. Once, I remember, a terrible pang of distress seized me, and the thoughts of renouncing myself, and standing naked before God, stripped of all goodness, were so dreadful to me, that I was ready to say to them, as Felix to Paul, "Go thy way for this time." Thus, though I daily longed for greater conviction of sin, supposing that I must see more of my dreadful state in order to a remedy; yet, when the discoveries of my vile, hellish heart were made to me, the sight was so dreadful, and showed me so plainly my exposedness to damnation, that I could not endure it. I constantly strove after whatever qualifications I imagined others obtained before the reception of Christ, in order to recommend me to his favour. Sometimes I felt the power of a hard heart, and supposed it must be softened before Christ would accept of me; and when I felt any meltings of heart, I hoped now the work was almost done: and hence, when my distress still remained, I was wont to murmur at God's dealings with me; and thought, when others felt their hearts softened, God showed them mercy; but my distress remained still.

' Sometimes I grew remiss and sluggish, without any great convictions of sin, for a considerable time together; but after such a season, convictions sometimes seized me more violently. One night I remember in particular, when I was walking solitarily abroad, I had opened to me such a view of my sin, that I feared the ground would cleave asunder under

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my feet, and become my grave, and send my soul quick into hell before I could get home. And though I was forced to go to bed lest my distress should be discovered by others, which I much feared, yet I scarce durst sleep at all ; for I thought it would be a great wonder if I should be out of hell in the morning. And though my distress was sometimes thus great, yet I greatly dreaded the loss of convictions, and returning back to a state of carnal security, and to my former insensibility of impending wrath ; which made me exceeding exact in my behaviour, lest I should stifle the motions of God's Spirit. When at any time I took a view of my convictions of my own sinfulness, and thought the degree of them to be considerable, I was wont to trust in my convictions ; but this confidence, and the hopes that arose in me from it, of soon making some notable advances towards deliverance, would ease my mind, and I soon became more senseless and remiss : but then again, when I discerned my convictions to grow languid, and I thought them about to leave me, this immediately alarmed and distressed me. Sometimes I expected to take a large step, and get very far towards conversion, by some particular opportunity or means I had in view.

‘The many disappointments, and great distresses and perplexity I met with, put me into a most horrible frame of contesting with the Almighty ; with an inward vehemence and virulence, finding fault with his ways of dealing with mankind. I found great fault with the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity ; and my wicked heart often wished for some other way of salvation than by Jesus Christ. And being like the troubled sea, and my thoughts con-

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fused, I used to contrive to escape the wrath of God by some other means, and had strange projections, full of Atheism, contriving to disappoint God's designs and decrees concerning me, or to escape God's notice, and hide myself from him. But when, upon reflection, I saw these projections were vain, and would not serve me, and that I could contrive nothing for my own relief, this would throw my mind into the most horrid frame, to wish there was no God, or to wish there were some other God that could control him. These thoughts and desires were the secret inclinations of my heart, that were frequently acting before I was aware; but, alas! they were mine, although I was affrighted with them when I came to reflect on them: when I considered of it, it distressed me to think, that my heart was so full of enmity against God; and it made me tremble, lest God's vengeance should suddenly fall upon me. I used before to imagine my heart was not so bad, as the scriptures and some other books represented. Sometimes I used to take much pains to work it up into a good frame, an humble submissive disposition; and hoped there was then some goodness in me: but it may be on a sudden, the thoughts of the strictness of the law, or the sovereignty of God, would so irritate the corruption of my heart, that I had so watched over, and hoped I had brought to a good frame, that it would break over all bounds, and burst forth on all sides, like floods of waters when they break down their dam. But being sensible of the necessity of a deep humiliation in order to a saving union with Christ, I used to set myself to work in my own heart those convictions that were requisite in such a humiliation; as, a conviction that God would be just if

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he cast me off for ever ; and that if ever God should bestow mercy on me, it would be mere grace, though I should be in distress many years first, and be ever so much engaged in duty ; that God was not in the least obliged to pity me the more for all past duties, cries, and tears. These things I strove to my utmost to bring myself to a firm belief of, and hearty assent to ; and hoped that now I was brought off from myself, and truly humbled and bowed to the divine sovereignty ; and was wont to tell God in my prayers, that now I had those very dispositions of soul that he required, and on which he showed mercy to others, and thereupon to beg and plead for mercy to me. But when I found no relief, and was still oppressed with guilt and fears of wrath, my soul was in a tumult, and my heart rose against God, as dealing hardly with me. Yet then my conscience flew in my face, putting me in mind of my late confession to God of his justice in my condemnation. And this giving me a sight of the badness of my heart, threw me again into distress, and I wished I had watched my heart more narrowly, to keep it from breaking out against God's dealings with me, and I even wished I had not pleaded for mercy on account of my humiliation, because thereby I had lost all my seeming goodness.

‘ Thus, scores of times, I vainly imagined myself humbled and prepared for saving mercy.

‘ While I was in this distressed, bewildered, and tumultuous state of mind, the corruption of my heart was especially irritated with these things following:—

‘ 1. The strictness of the divine law. For I found it was impossible for me, after my utmost pains, to