

Conversion of David Brainerd

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There was once an Englishman who lived in the eighteenth century and this man loved to hear good preaching. He would often travel to Scotland, the land of preaching, to listen to various preachers for his benefit and edification. On one journey, this Englishman heard three Scottish preachers and they each had a profound impact on him. The first man he listened to showed him the majesty and sovereignty of Almighty God. The next preacher he heard spoke of the utter wickedness of the sinner's heart. And the last man preached on the beauty and loveliness of Jesus Christ.

Now friends, is this not a picture of salvation? When we are confronted with the majesty of God and see him high and lifted up, we become undone like the prophet Isaiah and say, "Woe is me, for I am undone." And as we behold the holiness of God and the strictness and utter severity of his law, we are confronted with the wickedness of our own heart and realize our enmity toward God. Then through grace and mercy, we then see a revealed Christ and his beauty become desirable to us, his loveliness. And we desire him as we enter a saving knowledge of him through saving faith. Each of these aspects is seen in the life of David Brainerd in relation to how he came to Christ.

My message today, friends, is entitled "The Conversion of David Brainerd." And I believe it may be the most important message I've ever preached because as we study the conversion experience of David Brainerd we see how God gets a man lost before he saves him. I fear we have committed a big crime with our brand of evangelism in our day by shrinking God down to our size and we have taken salvation out of the hand of God and placed it in the hands of men. We must pay attention to the words of Christ who stated in John 6:44, "No man can come to me except the Father which has sent me, draw him."

This message is a call to evangelism armed with the full counsel of God and reliance upon the Spirit of God to draw man to Christ savingly. As we study the conversion experience of David Brainerd we can see the following in how God deals with the heart of sinful man before he saves him.

First, God gets a man lost. Friend, if you have never been lost, chances are you've never been truly saved. Jesus Christ came to seek and save that which was lost. After God gets a man lost, then he shuts up the sinner to himself. Then God performs a work in the heart making a heart of stone a heart of flesh and planting a disposition of holiness there. This

will be seen in the conversion experience of David Brainerd. I will use his diary and his own words for we must pay close attention to how Brainerd came to Christ. So we can learn much from him, for our day, in witnessing to our generation.

The first time I visited the town of North Hampton, Massachusetts I went to Bridge Street Cemetery in search for the grave of David Brainerd. After about a thirty minute search, I finally came across the marble slab which covers his remains. He died in the home of Jonathan Edwards at the age of 29 from tuberculosis. Jonathan Edwards always said he felt it was a great privilege to have David Brainerd die in his home and to be a witness to his death. Well, buried beside Brainerd is the daughter of Jonathan Edwards, Jerusha. She was supposedly engaged to Brainerd. She was his nursemaid for the last few months of his life. She died four months after he did at the tender age of 18. Their remains lie side by side awaiting the resurrection.

When I was writing the biography of Rolfe Barnard, I came across a startling sermon he preached on David Brainerd and it really shook me as I listened to it. I will include some of Rolfe Barnard's comments here for they are a worthy preface to our own study on the conversion of David Brainerd. Concerning Brainerd's conversion experience Rolfe Barnard had this to say, "Brainerd looked at these bone crushing, flesh killing things in the word of God and he looked at them and he didn't have any faith yet and he charged God with cruelty. And then David Brainerd faced a second problem of truth, that God Almighty has been pleased to show men the truth about their lost condition. And Brainerd faced the fact that God requires faith and he won't settle for anything else. And he didn't have none. And then David Brainerd faced a third thing, he found out he had to produce repentance and faith that was his own act. God's not going to repent for you. He's not going to believe for you. But you can't do it yourself. And he ran smack dab into the truth of God's word. That is the most humbling and the most pride killing and the most flesh slaying thing I ever faced. He found out that God Almighty has the right to give or withhold faith and under God he exercises that right. And then David Brainerd faced the last thing and that's in the word of God that God could save him or damn him and be just and take glory to himself."

Well, friends, let us now look at David Brainerd's salvation experience and how God dealt with his heart. First I will present the stages Brainerd went through because we can learn much from them. And I will quote his own words taken from his diary. The first stage David Brainerd experienced was that he came to realize he was resting on a false foundation of religious duties and self-righteousness. The next stage Brainerd experienced was how God gets a man lost before he saves him. Next, Brainerd became a seeker of God. He then fell under conviction of sin and saw that he was dead in trespasses and sins and he began to have enmity against God and the strictness of his holy law. And he blamed God for cruelty in imputing Adam's sin to him. Then Brainerd experienced humiliation. There's an old word for that called "compunction." He then realized that repentance and faith was necessary for salvation, but he could not produce them. He then saw the sovereignty of God in salvation, that God could give or withhold faith. Salvation was of grace. Brainerd then saw the beauty and loveliness of Christ. It was revealed to

him in a saving way. Brainerd saw a revealed Christ and entered a vital union with a living Lord. We can learn much from the study of these incidents in the life of Brainerd.

Now, we will examine the stages of David Brainerd's conversion. He first came to see that he was resting his hopes of salvation on a false foundation of religious duties and self-righteousness. Listen to his own words, "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, spent much time every day in prayer and other secret duties, gave great attention to the word preached and endeavored my utmost to retain it. In short, I had a very good outside and rested entirely on my duties." So evidently, Brainerd felt he had religion enough but he knew he was still missing something. Deep down in his heart he knew he wasn't saved.

The next thing that happened to David Brainerd happens to all who come to Christ and that is how God gets a man lost. Brainerd got lost. He saw his lost condition for the first time. In 1738 he wrote, "Sometime in the beginning of winter of 1738 it pleased God on one Sabbath morning as I was walking out for some secret duties to give me all of a sudden such a sense of my danger and the wrath of God that I stood amazed and my former good frames that I had pleased myself with, all presently vanished. From the view I had of my sin, and the vileness I was much distressed all that day fearing the vengeance of God would soon overtake me."

We see here, friends, how God gets a man lost before he can save him. Before this view of his lost condition before God, David Brainerd felt he was alright because of his long track record of doing good, of performing religious duties like reading his Bible, attending church and having prayer. But he found out that he was resting upon a false bottom, a shaky foundation of sin. He was lost. He saw his own wicked heart and a holy God whose vengeance would soon overtake him.

Notice next, that David Brainerd then became a seeker of God. Listen to his words from his diary, "Sometime in February, 1739, 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." So Brainerd first got lost and then he became a seeker.

O friends, I remember the day God showed me I was lost and on my way to hell and that I deserved to go there and how I became a seeker of him. This happened to Brainerd and as he sought God he was faced with the fact of the sovereignty of God and salvation and he got mad at God and he began to murmur against God. He said, "A terrible pang of distress seized me and the thoughts of reconciling myself in standing naked before God stripped of all goodness was so dreadful to me that I was ready to say to them as Felix to Paul, 'Go thy way for this time.' When my distress remained I was wont to murmur at God's dealings with me."

Then Brainerd's distress and conviction of sin increased. This is seen from the following comments. "One night I had open to me such a view of my sin that I feared the ground

would cleave asunder under my feet and become my grave and would send my soul quick into hell before I could get home. Though I was forced to go to bed lest my distress should be discovered by others which I much feared, yet scarcely slept at all for I thought it would be a great wonder if I should be out of hell in the morning.” This put Brainerd into the place of arguing with God over the fairness of his sovereignty. He wrote, “The many disappointments, 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.”

Listen to Brainerd’s comments. He began to wish there was no God. Oh friends, when Brainerd got lost and became a seeker and saw what a wretched sinner he was, that he was on his way to hell, he began to see how full his heart was with enmity toward God. That’s the condition of a lost man, a heart full of enmity to God. He saw that and then Brainerd said this, he said, “My soul was in a tumult and my heart rose against God as dealing hardly with me.”

Friends, has that been your case? Have you ever gotten lost? Have you ever become a seeker of God? Have you ever argued with God over his sovereignty and salvation and the fact that Adam’s sin was imputed to you? That you’re not a sinner because of sin, but that you sin because you’re a big sinner? Brainerd saw these things and his heart rose against God.

Now, look at the major things Brainerd faced and he could not deal with them. The first thing he said that he faced was the strictness of the divine law. Brainerd said the following, “For I found it was impossible for me after my utmost pains to answer its demands. I often made new resolutions and as often broke them. Then I quarreled with the law of God as unreasonably rigid. I found it condemned me from my evil thoughts and sins of my heart which I could not possibly prevent.”

Now, look what happens to David Brainerd, friends. Don’t miss this. He then says he came to realize the following as he fell into utter despair in himself. “And from seeing myself fallen into the hands of a sovereign God and depending on nothing but free and boundless grace.” In other words, Brainerd was shut up to God and God alone to save him. His religious duties, his long track record of prayers, Bible reading and attending church could not save him, only God could save him. He came to see that he was dependent on nothing but free and boundless grace.

Now friends, don’t miss this next thing David Brainerd faced. The old-fashioned word for it is “compunction.” We don’t hear that term much any more today and it’s a shame for God has to work a work of humiliation on the heart of a lost sinner. Listen to Brainerd’s experience at this time of compunction, “Being sensible of the necessity of a deep humiliation in order to a saving close with Christ, I used to set myself to work in my own heart those convictions that were requested and such humiliation as a conviction that God would be just if he cast me off forever. That if ever God should bestow mercy on

me, it would be mere grace. I was brought off from myself, truly humbled and then I bowed to the divine sovereignty.” O friends, how I need to preach about the necessity of conviction and compunction in our day. Brainerd saw this need.

Now, look at the next thing Brainerd had to face, he writes, “Another thing was that faith alone was the condition of salvation. That God would not come down to lower terms and he would not promise life and salvation upon my sincere and hardy prayers and endeavors. That word for Mark 16:16, ‘He that believeth not shall be damned,’ cut off all hopes there. I found faith was the sovereign gift of God, that I could not get it as of myself and could not oblige God to bestow it upon me by any of my performances.”

Brainerd saw he needed faith and he didn’t have it. He could not produce it on his own. He saw it was the gift of God. Is that not what Ephesians says in chapter 2, verse 8? “For by grace you are saved through faith and not that of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Well, that is what David Brainerd faced.

Now, the next thing he faced, this is the most bone crushing thing, the most flesh killing thing of all. He saw that, these are his words, “Another thing to which I found a great inward opposition was the sovereignty of God. I could not bare that it should be wholly at God’s pleasure to save me or damn me just as he would. That passage from Romans 9:11-23 was a constant fixation to me. Especially, verse 21, reading or meditating on this always destroyed my seeming good frames. It gave me such a dreadful view of myself that I dreaded more than ever to see myself in God’s hands at his sovereign disposal and it made me more opposite than ever to submit to his sovereignty. For I thought God designed my damnation.”

Now, listen to this friends, listen to what happens to David Brainerd at this juncture. He writes, “All this time, the Spirit of God was powerfully at work with me and I was inwardly pressed to relinquish all self-confidence, all hopes of ever helping myself by any means whatsoever. It was forever impossible for me to do anything towards helping or delivering myself.”

Now, listen friends, to how he came to saving faith in Christ. He was out walking in a solitary place when the following happened to him, “For near half an hour I was walking in a thick, dark grove. Unspeakable glory seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul. I do not mean any external brightness for I saw no such thing but it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God such as I had never had before nor anything which has had the least resemblance to it. I stood still, wondered and admired. I knew that I never had seen before anything comparable to it for its excellency. It appeared to be divine glory. My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable, to see such a God, such a glorious divine being. My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellency, loveliness, greatness and other perfections of God that I was even swallowed up in him. Thus, God I trust, brought me to a hardy disposition to exalt him and set him on the throne and principally and ultimately to aim at his honor and glory as King of the Universe, I felt myself in a new world.”

That friends, is salvation. Brainerd saw what that Englishman saw, he saw the sovereignty and majesty of God. He then saw his own wicked heart and then he saw a revealed Christ and his loveliness. What God did with David Brainerd after that as a missionary to the Indians is history. His journal has been an influence for missionary activity for generations and has impacted thousands of believers all over the world. But first, he had to see his own self-righteousness, he had to get lost, he had to shut himself up to the sovereignty of God and salvation, pass through a period of humiliation and utter dependence upon God to save him and then beg God for mercy as a seeker, he became a seeker. Finally, he saw a revealed Christ and his glory, his loveliness and he saw him as the King of the Universe and he bowed to him in utter submission. He threw down his shotgun of rebellion.

That's salvation friends. That is salvation. O I pray that we today can get an ounce of Brainerd in us as we witness for Christ. That we too can be as wise as Brainerd when it comes to presenting the gospel of the Son of God to lost men and women. O friends, pray that God will make you a soul winner to bring in the lost, to compel them to come in, take the gospel of the glory of God and pray for the anointing of the Spirit of God and pray that the Lord of the harvest will be pleased to use you to get men lost so God can save them.