

Elder E. Rittenhouse

Autobiography



FOR THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

Kingwood, N. J., June 25, 1848.

ESTEEMED BROTHER IN CHRIST: – The appearance of my name in your columns in your last number, reminds me of my unfinished task, and consequently of my duty to you and your readers to endeavor to prosecute it. The individual whose history we then introduced, we left swallowed up in atheism and infidelity. And it was under such circumstances, and in such a state of mind, that he was soon called upon to take a last farewell of an affectionate father. And thus to witness, in the hour of dissolving nature, that composure and peace, yea that heavenly calm in the midst of the tempest, which none but a christian knows, and none but a christian's God can give. While nature is failing, and the earth, with every earthly tie, receding from the view; that faith by which he had long lived, and which is his strength and support as life is about to close, now begins to triumph, and rising victorious above the terrors of death, he exclaims: "Glory, glory to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ!" But the scene forever closes, and he with whom we had so often knelt in family devotion, who had so early and faithfully stored the minds of his children with the precepts of divine truth; and now sealing his testimony by a death in accordance with his life, exemplifying and honoring that religion and that cause which he had espoused, has gone to "rest from his labors." All these things however proved of little avail with me. I have thought since that, at this time I must have been led captive by the enemy at his will. It does not seem that I was at liberty even to think for myself. I recollect however contrasting the unearthly peace and serenity which filled his mind, with what would be my own feelings were I placed in the same situation.

Those who are accustomed, in times of sore trial and afflictions to rest their care and their complaints with him who cares for them and sympathizes with them, can hardly appreciate the utter desolation of a soul in such a state as I have been describing. But he who is "A father to the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, in his holy habitation," remembered us in our afflictions. And in the trials and sufferings through which a widow with a family of children must necessarily pass, the kind interposition of an overruling providence was too manifest to be denied. It may be thought that I could see these things now as I could not before. But be that as it may, my doubts and unbelief fled away. They were dispersed and gone, like the darkness at the appearance of the morning sun; and I could neither doubt, nor deny, what it was my privilege to witness daily and continually. And from that time to the present I have been confirmed and fully established on that point; so that I do not think that any arguments or reasonings of men would have moved me. What I had once believed I now knew to be true.

As it had been previous, so also subsequent to this time, seasons of conviction for sin, or what was supposed to be sin, would follow each other at intervals, sometimes of a few weeks, and sometimes of only a few days; these were followed of course by an attempt at reformation, but before much advance could be made, it would invariably be forgotten: and again ere long conviction be renewed. The various vanities and follies of youth; among them, trifling away the day set apart for worship, would be charged upon me, and a strict reform attempted. But so it was, every attempt proved a failure every resolution was formed only to be broken, and not a single duty that I considered myself bound to perform, but would in a short time pass from my memory.

In the course of events a sweeping revival took place in the congregation with which I was accustomed to meet; such a revival I mean as is conducted and controlled wholly by an individual, the result of which was that the principal part of the youth of the neighborhood were eventually put under the water. I attended through the whole of it, and I think felt anxious to be benefitted, if such could be the case. I listened attentively to all they had to say, and followed their directions as far as I could. To have gone farther would have been presumption in me. It might do for them to claim the promise in their favor, and to demand as of right the pardon and forgiveness of their sins, in their own way; to go on and serve the Lord (as they said) whether he saved them or not, but it would not do for me. I could find no promises in my favor, they were all against me. I had no lawful claims whatever to present; I had forfeited every claim and every right; and as to serving the Lord, as often as I had tried that I had failed. Moreover I had learned from the word, that whatever was not of faith was sin; and that faith I conscious I was destitute of. What therefore remained for me more than the prayer of the publican? Let the event be what it may, I must withdraw from them, though I should become more hardened and impenitent than ever. For a time I would read and study much, in order to become acquainted with the way of life, and then sink into a longer and deeper apostacy. A consciousness of guilt and fear of the consequences remained with me more or less however for some years, but finally ceased to trouble me. I longed to taste the sweets of sin without restraint, to be removed from the presence of my Maker, and revel in iniquity to the utmost. That I could, after thus bearing testimony to the goodness of the Lord, so soon transgress against him with impunity and without remorse, may seem incredible, yet such was the case. This was not of long continuance however, before I was led to reflect on the course I was pursuing, on the mercies and and long suffering of an offended God towards so rebellious a creature, which had been manifested to me at times, and in ways, of which I cannot now speak particularly; and on my own iniquitous career in return, and as might be expected I sunk despondently into deep and dark despair. The sentence of death now came upon me and I confessed it just. "Behold, my servants shall sing for joy of heart, and ye shall howl for vexation of spirit." "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries." I felt conscious that I had sinned thus wilfully, that I had set at nought all his counsel, and would none of his reproof. What therefore remained for me, but that when my fear came as desolation, and my destruction as a whirlwind; to eat of the fruit of my own way, and be filled with my own devices. "They shall call upon me but I will not answer; they shall seek me early but they shall not find me." I had once earnestly sought him, and longed to obtain mercy at his hands; but now, how could I come before him, or dare to enter into his presence? On the contrary, I abandoned all idea or expectation of ever being saved, or of seeking for mercy at all; and for weeks and months together, meditated on the nature and extent of that punishment to which I would be subjected as the wages of iniquity.

But he whose mercies are unsearchable, I trust had some better things in store for me.

PART II.

July 20, 1848.

BROTHER BEEBE: – From the borders of the pit, from the very confines of a land of darkness and of the shadow of death, we propose to resume our subject.

The reader will recollect, in our last communication, he had followed us down very near to that place where hope and mercy never comes; in which we then expected to receive our portion. I think I even felt some degree of resignation to such a fate. I felt all along a firm conviction that I should suffer nothing unjustly, nothing but the due reward of my own doings. I felt a confidence of receiving all the favor at the hands of the sovereign Judge that the circumstances of my case would admit of. Still what less could it be, than a “judgment and fiery indignation” which would devour me as an adversary?

Reader, do you not suppose that I now might have enjoyed the sweets of sin – that as my portion was in this life, I might have indulged in the lusts and pleasures thereof without restraint? But not so; I had lost my relish for sin. I had learned by sad experience what an “evil and bitter thing” sin was. Like as a child that has felt the scorching influence of the fire, carefully avoids and flees from it, so it was my desire and earnest solicitude to shun the appearance of evil. A sense of the Lord’s mercy and forbearance towards me weighed heavily upon my mind, so that I could not willingly sin against him. Let me be understood then, that considering my fate to be irrevocably sealed, and that be my course of life as it might, such was my unalterable destiny, in all candor I think that at this time I abhorred sin, and that my desire was to live a holy life. During this time my reflections were at no time so violent as to prevent my attending regularly to business, and I think not so as to be known or understood by others – but more of this in its proper place. I did not rest very easy in this situation, but after a time I thought again of the great salvation and of the exceeding great and precious promises, extending to the vile, yea, and the rebellious also; can it be so, that there is neither help nor hope for me? I looked at the different characters set forth in the scriptures as having obtained forgiveness, to see whether any were so aggravated as mine. I thought with admiration of the resolve of queen Esther, “I will go in unto the king, and if I perish, I perish.” Though it should be presumption in me to do so, I could but perish any how, and I began to think seriously of pursuing a similar course. Besides, the encouragement given by the blessed Jesus in various places to sinners, of every grade and character to call upon him, led me to inquire will he be offended and frown me from his presence if I once more seek his face? Allow me here to digress a moment and say to every self-condemned despairing soul, – read our Lord’s words in the parable of the unjust judge, Luke xviii. 1-8, and see if there is not encouragement there for even such as you and myself. But to proceed. Hope seemed to be beaming in upon me though as yet I could see no ground of hope, nor any way of escape. The scripture which lay sorest upon me, (of which I have spoken before,) I carefully examined again, to see whether it effectually shut the door against me or not, when the following clause or sentence arrested my attention, “After that we have received the knowledge of the truth.” Perhaps this will not apply to me, or that I am not the character designed in the

passage. It may be that I have been ignorant of sin, its nature and consequences – ignorant of the extent and dominion of the holy law, and ignorant of the character of him against whom I have so wantonly transgressed: and as Paul obtained mercy because he sinned in ignorance and unbelief, perhaps my being destitute of the knowledge of the truth might afford some reasons to hope for the manifestation of divine mercy towards me also. There occurred to my mind about this time a passage in Bunyan’s Pilgrim, from which I took some encouragement, although I was doubtful at the time about its being upon scripture authority. It is the reply of Goodwill to the confession of Christian on coming up to the gate, “We make no objections against any, notwithstanding all that they have done before they come hither.” It seemed however to contain the force of truth, and perhaps is fully warranted by the passage, “And him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” Having obtained thus much, I resolved to consult one of the members of the church, hoping that I might learn of one who was travelling in the christian race what above all things I wished to know. I embraced the first opportunity to do so, but left the house to return to my residence, as desponding as I went. The time of deliverance was however drawing near, and before I reached home a sentence of scripture came upon my mind with seemingly divine authority, equal in length, and breadth, and depth, and height, to the condemnation under which I lay, viz: “Wherefore he is able to save unto the uttermost” together with this, “My grace is sufficient for thee.” O! how rich, how full, and how free did that salvation which is in and through the Lord Jesus appear to my view! The riches of his grace, how they have been exemplified from time to time, in the extension of mercy and pardon to some of the vilest transgressors that have ever received from him the breath of life! It is enough; there is sufficient for me. I became satisfied that he was a Saviour that was able to save, and that the provisions of the gospel were fully commensurate with the condition of lost sinners, abundantly adequate to reach the most desperate case. “Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight, yet I will again toward thy holy temple.” I now felt an assurance that there was mercy in store for me, and from that hopeless despondency which I had been sinking under, from that time to the present, I have enjoyed entire and complete relief. But although I now believed that there was enough and to spare in my Father’s house, yet I was starving in a foreign land, and was not permitted to taste thereof. Months again passed without any thing special taking place, save that I continued, and that with much confidence, to seek an evidence for myself, that I was interested in that great salvation. At length, after meeting with much delay, I began to doubt, to wonder why it should thus be; whether I might not have been deceived or mistaken. As I was thus meditating, when alone in the house I took up the sacred volume to examine its pages, and see whether there was any thing there for me, (for as yet it had always condemned me,) and I opened to the following words; “By night upon my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him but I found him not. I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but found him not.” Here was my very complaint coming from the church, and that many centuries ago. It showed me that the Lord’s people in all ages had met with similar delays and discouragements to that which I was now complaining of; and withal that this complaint was from the church and not the world. I also learned in the next verse that it was not of very long continuance: that his mercy was not “clean gone for ever, neither did his promise fail forever more.” Thus did I at this time receive some evidence for myself, the first that I had received at all; and my drooping hopes were again revived.

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PART III.

Kingwood, New Jersey,
August 22, 1848.

DEAR BROTHER IN THE LORD: – The witness received in the manner before stated lasted me a few days, and but a few. Although I had so very recently received much assurance, I was already beginning to sink. My hopes so lately raised by divine testimony, were now almost as low as ever. Well hath the Master said “O faithless and perverse generation.” Observe now my brother, as you follow me along, his condescension and long suffering toward me. How kindly, when strength and hope began to fail, again and again he rescued me. Pressed down under a sense of guilt, I was now longing for deliverance; and although I had been enabled to hope that I should yet taste that the Lord was gracious, the burden of sin seemed rather to increase than to diminish. I examined the experience of others, such as I could meet with in print, and of course expected that if I were released at all, the way and manner would be similar to theirs. I was looking and anxiously looking for some great event, which should set the matter beyond all question, that my sins were forgiven; and fill me with joy and peace in believing. But I was becoming impatient of the long delay. I had hoped that in some favored hour, he would, as with an audible voice, have spoken peace to my conscience, and declared my sins forgiven; even so as to preclude all doubt, either with myself or with others. My mind had become fixed upon a method of my own, and I could hardly be satisfied with any other. But it did not please the Lord, (if I have been taught of him at all,) to follow in the way I had marked out, nor even to gratify my wishes in the slightest particular; but rather to lead me in a way I knew not, to show me that his way was not mine, and cause me to be satisfied with his will concerning me. But at the time I am speaking of, my sins were still ever before me and from a guilty conscience, I had not as yet received the least relief. Why was it? Perhaps I asked and received not, because I asked amiss, or it might be that I was not sufficiently in earnest about it, that I did not with all my heart desire it; that I thought more of the enjoyments of this life, of my personal reputation, or of worldly honors and emoluments, than I did of the cause of Christ, and that I would be unwilling to sacrifice these things for an inheritance in him. I thought also of instances where I had known individuals to weep day and night, refusing to be comforted, sleep fleeing from them, and even bodily strength failing, so that they were unable to pursue their calling, such distress, effecting so visibly both mind and body, I had never experienced. I thought much, about this time also, of the blessed Jesus spending a whole night in prayer. O could I but have felt what others had; could I but have mourned and wept in bitter anguish on account of sin, but I could not. Instead of this, I really thought sometimes, that I was unwilling to be a christian if I could. Under such circumstances it was, that on opening the sacred volume. I was met with the following words: “I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.” The words contained in the first verse were new to me, and more particularly arrested my attention. I had hoped for a manifestation of mercy, for an evidence of pardon, and was murmuring, and repining, because I did not realize it. But O, how I was silenced, and rebuked by these words! If the man after God’s own heart could thus patiently wait the pleasure of the Lord; above all creatures that ever existed let me be still, and cease to murmur; and if I have reason to hope, or expect, that my feet will yet be taken out of the mire, let me be reconciled to his will, and wait patiently for him. If I have succeeded in giving you any just conception of my mind and feelings at this time, you will readily discover the fitness of this language, in its

application to me. If the inspired Psalmist had designed it expressly for me, I cannot conceive how or what else he could have uttered, as well calculated to calm my troubled spirit, revive my hopes, and give me an earnest of a final deliverance. But this was not all that I received at that time; equally reasonable and forcible were also these words, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.” I had read these words before, but never for myself; they were altogether applicable to others. But now, with all their promise and excellence, I myself could receive them, and rejoice in them. I twas enough; it was an assurance, with which I was for the present satisfied; but I had to live many days upon what I then received, and though my confidence was pretty strong, I soon found abundant use for the whole of it. The blackness of guilt, the aggravated character of transgression, committed against the goodness of a long-suffering God, increased in my view continually. My own conscience bore witness against me. Sin, even that which is exceeding sinful and “like unto the sin of witchcraft,” long since forgotten, was brought fresh to my recollection, and charged upon me; and not only so, but even now, it was found in every thing I said, or did. The words of the blessed Jesus, Matth. xii. 36, “But I say unto you, that every idle word – that men shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” were continually upon my mind for weeks, witnessing against me, and convicting me at every sentence I uttered. I have shunned people, lest they should speak to me. I have carefully guarded every sentence, but in vain; I was cut off at every point, condemned on every hand.

About this time, my attention was accidentally arrested by a sentence in Paul to Timothy, where, after setting forth his own character as a blasphemer, and persecutor, and the riches of that grace which had abounded towards him, he says: “Howbeit, for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should here-after believe on him.” Behold here, my brother, the condescension of the blessed Jesus; I was struck with awe and wonder! So prone are we to doubt, to conclude that none so vile as we ever obtained forgiveness, (and that we shall yet be made signal examples of divine vengeance,) that in the first setting up of the gospel dispensation, one of his most bitter enemies and persecutors was selected as a monument of his mercy and “for a pattern” to such as you, and myself. No marvel then, that the Apostle breaks out in the following ecstasy, with which I will conclude for the present: “Now, unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

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PART IV.

Kingwood, N. J., Sept. 20, 1848.

DEAR BROTHER: – Having long halted between those opinions, still clinging to the world, and feeling at times unwilling to give it up, unwilling to sacrifice the honors and pleasure of this life, to lose my reputation, and have my name cast out as evil for the sake of Christ, from this time forward the case

became decided, I ceased to enjoy the things of this world, and the society of my former companions; the vanities and follies in which they delighted had altogether lost their charms with me, and I now longed after the society and fellowship of the people of God. I questioned my right to associate with them, and consequently dwelt in a measure alone, not enjoying the company of any body. I began to feel a great increasing anxiety to be united with the society, but if this be forever denied me, I must remain alone, for I can not go back. About this time also, I found myself resting upon the promises, and enjoying a comfortable hope in Christ. I cannot point out any one time, or circumstance, it seemed to be so gradual, that I was hardly aware of the change. But, from a long season of toil, I was now at rest. The promises of the gospel seemed to point out my character, and I received comfort and consolation therefrom. Instead of condemning me as formerly, and speaking comforting only to others, the scriptures now, in the subject of the promises, so clearly set forth and described my character and exercises, that I could receive them, and rest upon them. The name of Jesus had a sweetness and preciousness in it; it was to me a name above every name. This word that formerly was unimportant, and that I could slight and disregard, neglect its precepts, and hearken to none of its threatenings, or in short that I did not believe; now became to me a different book: it was not the word of the Lord, the language of him that speaketh from heaven. Whether it were precept or promise, I could rely upon it as divine testimony, as the language of him that cannot lie. Perhaps I realized something of what it is, to “tremble at his word.” Now it was that after every refuge had failed me, all my exertions proved abortive, and my hope ended in disappointment; the word of the Lord alone was sufficient for me: so that when he pointed out my character, and bid me trust in him, and rely upon his salvation; I found myself believing it, receiving it, even almost before I was aware; and that, ceasing from my own works, I was enjoying a repose in him, to which before I had been a stranger. I now read, in the exercises of the saints of old, much of my own. The Psalms of David seemed to speak the very language of my own heart, and enter into my feelings and desires, fuller and clearer than I could relate them myself. All these things however were far from satisfying me, they did not amount to what I had been looking for, and I could not conceive that they amounted to a christian experience. It still remained, and forever must remain, “The sinner must be born again.” I could not for a moment believe that the things of which I have spoken constituted, or would amount to the new birth.

I reviewed them again and again, in order to a just conception of my privilege and duty, and that I might not be mistaken, but they appeared trifling and of little importance in comparison with a “deliverance from the power of darkness, and translation into the kingdom of God’s dear Son.” While I thus reasoned with myself, it was said unto me, “Whether is easier to say, thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?” From this I was shown, that the spirit was not confined to method in his teachings, and that if I had been given strength and hope sufficient to “Arise and walk” I had reason to be satisfied, and to rejoice therein, as much as if it had come in the way I had been looking for.

I continued however, to seek for more and brighter evidence, but I did not receive any more as formerly, but instead thereof, I met with reproaches for my unbelief and hardness of heart. At one time when an opportunity offered to go before the church, and others were going, these words were forcibly pressed upon me, “Be not faithless but believing.” At another time I was reproved in this way, “O fools and slow of heart to believe.” My anxiety increased all the while to name the name of Christ, and share with his followers the reproaches and persecutions which are inseparably connected with an espousal of his cause. But were I to offer myself to the church, What could I tell? What things I could think of, bore but little resemblance to christian experience, and I feared being deceived, and deceiving others. More than once, or twice, I fixed upon a time, when I hoped to be ready to unite with the church, (if they would receive me,) but in this also I was foiled. There remained therefore no alternative for me, but to

take that reprobate course, to “wait the Lord’s time.” One day, in the month of July, 1847, I concluded to take a careful review of every circumstance from first to last, and weigh the evidence for and against; and compare such testimony as I had, with what the word authorized me to expect, in order that I might know if possible my true standing. In the first place my worst difficulty was, that I had never had trouble enough; that my exercises had never been as severe as those of others,

“If aught was felt ‘twas only pain
To find I could not feel.”

I had seldom if ever been caused to weep, and although sensible of my situation, a degree of hardness and indifference thereto seemed to prevail with me. And not only so, but there is a joy and peace in believing, a joy which is unspeakable, and full of glory, spoken of, which I did not think that I had ever realized. It appeared to me, that something of this kind, which was necessary, was altogether wanting with me. Such overflowing light and joy, as you have had frequently to record; when every thing in nature appeared to be praising the Creator, is even yet unknown to me. In short, the result of this inquiry was the same as before, – against myself. I must be content, without some farther testimony, to dwell on the other side Jordan. No sooner was this decision formed, than quick as thought, was this scripture presented; “We walk by faith not by sight.” The words were few, and the time was short, yet my decision was reversed, my views were entirely changed – I saw that what I had been seeking for, would amount to walking by sight, that it was more than was allotted to believers here, to enjoy; that their walk was a walk of trust and dependence, constantly looking to Jesus, and receiving all from him; having nothing in themselves, but in him possessing all things; that they have his faithful word of promise, and that it is their privilege to believe it, and to live upon it. Were it not so, there would be no necessity for the exercise of faith. Moreover I saw also, that I was living in this way, that I only lived as I lived upon him, that in myself was death, but in him was life, that I was resting in him, and that whatever of life, of hope, of peace, or consolation I enjoyed, it was derived from him, and from no other quarter. Suffice it to say, that the way was now open, the difficulties that had long perplexed me were effectually removed; and I was, unworthy as I am, shortly after this, admitted to the ordinances of the Lord’s house, and to the fellowship of his people.

I have thus led you back, “to the rock from whence I was hewn, to the hole of the pit from whence I was digged.” I have withheld nothing that I thought would be profitable to you, or have a tendency to exalt the character of the Savior of sinners. I have related in faithfulness what perhaps a proper sense of delicacy might have led me to conceal. I have endeavored to render myself intelligible to the weakest capacity; and if I have presented any thing incorrectly, or given a false coloring to any circumstance, rest assured it has been done undesignedly. And now render, in closing this subject, let me address a few words to you. Whether you claim the relationship of brethren and sisters or not; whether you reside in Maine or Louisiana, wherever this imperfect sketch of my history finds you, let me ask, in relating to you my experience, have I told any part of yours? Is this the way that you have learned Christ? and has he displayed the riches of his grace and mercy unto you, as he has unto me? Does your want of experience perplex you, and cause you to despond? it is this that has ever been a source of deep concern with me. Have any of you become so hardened in sin, or been so far sold to do iniquity, that you are ready to conclude the divine mercy cannot reach you? Let me point you to a Savior who is able to save you – to such a High Priest as becomes us. It is thus that he is pleased to display his mercy, and make known the riches of his grace, by causing them to shine upon the very chief of sinners. Mark what he has done for me. How long suffering through an almost unparalleled career of transgression; and then when brought low, even down to despair and death, he brought salvation near, causing me to

hope, and spake comforting to me. Let none despair, seeing that he has thus entered the very flames to pluck a brand out of the burning; yea from the sides of the pit have his everlasting arms rescued me, reaching even to where I was. My only object in this relation, is to spread his praise abroad, and tell you what great things he has done for me. While ever I have the privilege of employing tongue or pen, let me “abundantly utter the memory of his great goodness, and sing of his righteousness.” May his blessing follow what is in accordance with his will, and may it be our happy privilege, to enjoy the testimony of the unerring Spirit of truth, that we are the subjects of a work of grace, for the Savior’s sake. Amen.

E. RITTENHOUSE.
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