My Testimony

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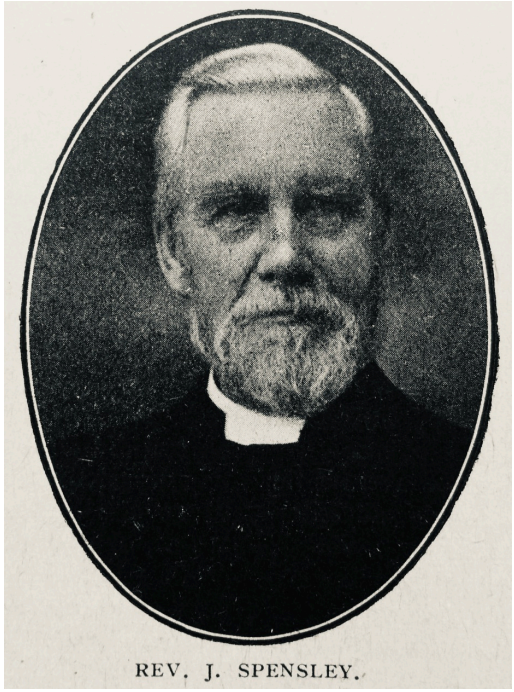
REV. J. SPENSLEY.

I WAS born June 12th, 1839, converted on the 23rd of November 1854, put on the plan as a local preacher in June, 1858, and made a travelling preacher in October, 1861—all in my native circuit, Barnsley.

The first fifteen years of my life educationally and religiously were little better than wasted—almost a *blank*. My schooling days were few indeed. I do just remember the old dame's school in her cottage, and having to stand in the corner with the dunce's cap on as a sort of punishment for talking, and sundry mischievous tricks. My father being a miner, I was taken to work in the pit when only ten years of age, and seldom saw the light of the sun in mid-winter, except on Sundays. Indeed, it was no unusual thing in those days, for boys to be sent to work in the mines when only seven or eight years old, which meant, of course, that their education, in almost nine cases out of ten, was a blank.

When the.Lord converted me at the age of fifteen, I was a rough and illiterate pit-lad—unable to read or write. I did just know the letters of the alphabet, and learnt to read and write after my conversion by the use of an old spelling book—the only book in my home at the time—and an old broken slate. "Straight strokes and pot-hooks" were my first copy in writing.

Before my conversion my Sundays were generally spent in the fields, lanes and woods near to my home; or in wandering from one village to another with other wicked youths, and not infrequently finishing up at the village wayside public-house. My parents were ungodly people, and, like many more of their class, paid no regard whatever to religious home-training. Indeed, vast multitudes in the mining districts of those days lived utterly regardless of God and religion—lived as if there were no God, no hereafter, no coming judgment, and were absolutely unconcerned either about their own salvation or the salvation of others— not even those of their own household. Hundreds of families among the South Yorkshire miners sixty or seventy years ago were very little removed from pure heathenism. Drinking, gambling, dog-fighting, cock-fighting, and almost every other imaginable form of wickedness was carried on. No wonder, therefore, that with such influences and environments the first fifteen years of my life were lived in sin and folly. The wonder to me is that I got saved at all, and especially so early in life. I was indeed a "brand plucked out of the fire.

A somewhat remarkable incident occurred just before my conversion, which had, no doubt, something to do with bringing about that happy and glorious change. Like many other boys, I was very fond of bird-nesting, and nearly always did it on the Sabbath Day. On this occasion I and another boy arranged to go one Sunday into what was called "Tomroyd Wood," in search of magpie nests. We

had not gone far before we sighted one at the top of a very tall tree, and, being the bigger lad, it was agreed that I should go for it. Just as I reached the nest, and was about to bring away the eggs, my companion below began screaming and rushing about to find his way out of the wood, and shouting all the while, “Oh, Jack, Jack, do come down. T’old lad is coming down the wood!” I also began to scream, and it goes without saying that I came down the tree much faster than I went up, quite expecting to find his satanic majesty ready to receive me at the bottom. How I got down and out of the wood I never could tell. I have a very vivid recollection, however, of how I rushed here and there among the undergrowth, expecting every moment to feel myself in the clutches of “t’old lad.” This incident, I am thankful to say, made a very deep impression on my youthful mind, and I never rested until I had found the Saviour.

My first religious convictions I never shall forget. They came to me with such overwhelming force, and my condition as a poor, wretched and hell-deserving sinner was so vividly revealed to me by the Spirit of God that for days and even weeks I felt as if I were hanging over the very pit of hell, and was afraid of going to sleep at night lest I should awake in the bottomless abyss of misery and be lost for ever. I had darkness and guilt within. For several weeks I longed for, light and sighed for deliverance, but being very illiterate, and totally ignorant of the plan of salvation, and having no one to whom I could tell out my soul-distress, I no doubt remained in this condition much longer than I otherwise should have done. But, thank God, light and deliverance came at length, and I became blessedly conscious of the fact that I had passed out of darkness into light, and from the power of Satan unto God. Oh, the thrill and joy of that moment! The darkness which had obscured the bright face of the Sun of Righteousness was scattered like mist before the rushing breeze, and a light, brighter than the brightest summer’s mid-day sun, filled and illumined my whole being, and I consciously realised the truthfulness of the scripture which says, “The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin.” This marvellous change did not take place in a great and exciting revival, when large numbers were being swept into the Kingdom of God, but in a quiet, ordinary, week-night prayer-meeting, held in a small preaching room at Thurgoland in the Barnsley Circuit, nearly seventy years ago. The Rev. Hezekiah Cooke—now sainted in glory—knelt by my side, and pointed me to the uplifted Cross of Calvary, in which I found life and healing for my distressed and sin-stricken soul.

My call to the ministry came to me with my conversion,, and, although from a merely human point of view it seemed extremely improbable that I should ever enter the Christian ministry, yet, remarkable to say, within seven years after my conversion I was fully engaged in the work in my own circuit, where I had laboured nearly four years as a local preacher, and where I had witnessed some marvellous works of grace among the South Yorkshire miners in the surrounding villages. The Lord made me an evangelist straight off when He converted me—filled and fired my soul with a zeal, enthusiasm and passion for souls which, thank God, nothing has yet been able to cool or destroy. All through my early Christian life and local preachership I worked on evangelistic lines, and, had the unspeakable joy of leading scores of souls to Jesus Christ.

The call of the Church came just a little earlier than I expected. I knew it would come, sooner or later, as part of the divine plan; and hence, at the September quarterly meeting of 1861, held at Hoyland, then a part of the Barnsley Circuit, the question of calling out a third minister was discussed and sympathetically settled. The next question was, “Where shall we find the man?” and without one word of discussion it was unanimously decided that I should be asked to accept the position, with the understanding that the circuit would pledge me at the ensuing March quarterly meeting. In all

this I could clearly see the hand of God. I felt sure He had opened the door, and that if I did not enter therein it would be at my own peril. Without one moment's hesitation, therefore, I acceded to the request, and thus entered upon the great and glorious work of my life, feeling that I was God's man, willing to be used by Him and for Him anywhere and anyhow.

Before entering the ministry I had twelve years of pit life—from ten to twenty-two—and had two very narrow escapes from being killed, one by a heavy fall of coals, which buried me except my head; the other by being pulled in among six full half-ton runaway tubs or "corves" at the top of a very steep incline or "ginny." I have always attributed my escape from death in both instances to the interposition of a wise and merciful Providence.

I well remember the day I left my secular calling for the work of the ministry— Friday, October 18th, 1861. My outfit was neither extensive nor expensive. A small wooden box, which I believe originally belonged to my grandmother, held the lot—books, boots, clothes, everything —and travelled with me nearly through the whole of my active ministry. It was decided that I should reside in the town, and work round the circuit in turn with the other two ministers, the Rev. George Normandale and the Rev. John F. Parrish, both of whom were faithful and soul-winning ministers of the gospel, and are now reaping their reward on the other side of the river. Having laboured in the circuit nearly four years as a local preacher, I had no old stock of sermons to fall back upon. But this turned out to be an advantage to me rather than otherwise.

My nine months' labours as "hired local preacher," I am thankful to say, were greatly owned of God. The soul-saving work prospered all the time, and great spiritual awakening was experienced at every place. Indeed, the whole circuit was ablaze with revival flame, and scores of souls were gathered into the Church, including my own father, and we had the great joy and satisfaction of reporting an increase of one hundred members for the year.

Having passed the preliminary examinations of the March quarterly meeting and the District Synod of 1862, I was recommended to the ensuing Conference, held at Sheffield, as a suitable candidate to be accepted as a minister on probation, and was put down for Malton, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, an agricultural circuit composed of twenty-one places, some of them eight, ten and twelve miles from the circuit town, involving considerable study and practice in plodology, and not a little exposure to the ill effects of having to sleep in several fresh beds every week. Still, I was perfectly satisfied with the appointment, fully believing that for once the Conference and Providence were in perfect agreement, which, I fear, has not always been the case in the stationing of ministers.

References

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