

## A SAVING MOMENT

So here we are. Have you wondered how I had the confidence to share what I have in the other chapters? Certainly, I would have said, “Who is she to write such things?” Who I am now is rooted in one pivotal experience, an experience that I, as a Christian Scientist, wasn’t really prepared for. I didn’t know the proper words to describe it, didn’t even know it existed. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Six years after my first reading of the poem, “Teach Me to Love,” and two years before meeting Eva, my life was a disaster. One might think that starting on the road to a more loving life would have immediately brought blessings and joy. But that wasn’t the case. My purpose and my spiritual conviction were in tatters, and my mental state was disintegrating along with my marriage.

I was working in Boston at the Christian Science church headquarters at the time. My motive for going there, at least so I thought, was to find out what was missing in my understanding of God. It’s probably more than just a little ironic that such a step, motivated as it was by zeal and ambition, would lead me to Christ. Each day I went to work with a heavy heart—even before my husband deserted me. When I was living alone, I prayed for joy, for some “surcease of sorrow,” but it didn’t come. My religion failed me completely. I hated who I was and, for the first time in my life, lost all direction and wondered what was going to happen to me.

Every day I dragged myself to work and dragged myself home again. Time seemed to stand still. Finally, one morning, I was in bed thinking, "I cannot get up. I just can't carry it any more. The burden is too great." It was as if I were lying out on the floor with all the gravity of the earth flattening every particle of my being. Then the words from a popular evangelical song came to me, words asking the Saviour to "raise my hand"\* and then lift me up. I didn't even need the strength to reach out to him. What utter helplessness, what complete yielding!

Then, he was there in the room with me. I can describe it no other way. The Saviour was standing beside the bed, lifting me up, filling me with warmth and light. He filled every crevice of need and longing and loneliness. The joy I had been seeking for months just bubbled up inside. The despair for my situation was gone. It didn't matter that I was thousands of miles from friends and family—I wasn't alone. It didn't matter that I was gone eleven hours a day commuting to and from a job in a strange city. He was with me. The fear over my lack of money was not mine to carry any more. I was totally at peace, and he was there. And in the many years since that experience, that core of warmth, that inner smile, has not left me. When I'm struggling, I just empty myself out and let the Saviour's love fill me and his tender presence surround me—"Dayspring from on high be near; daystar in my heart appear."

You need to realize, however, that what I have written in these chapters did not become clear on that single, shining day. My religion had offered me no context for what I had just experienced. The direction my life would take was no clearer at the end of that day than it was at the beginning. Only the burden and the aloneness were gone.

In the years following this experience, I searched Christian writings to find something that was similar to what happened to me. What I found is that all the great Christian lights write in various ways of a saving moment. But the sense of a living being standing right there with me finds its closest parallel in the experience Charles Raven describes in his book *A Wanderer's Way* (1929). Raven was

visiting a friend who was ill, a Christian who had been struggling just as Raven was. Raven writes of his arrival in Stoke to see his friend:

He was not alone. Since I had seen him, he had found Jesus, and the effect of the discovery was manifest. His whole direction and outlook were altered under the new influence: there was joy and quiet confidence in his face, purpose in his life, sympathy and strength in his actions. Jesus was alive and present to my friend as he had been to the eleven in the upper room. He was alive and present to me. ... Now I knew. It was not a dream for Saul of Tarsus, nor for a multitude of disciples through the ages. It was no longer a dream for me: for here was the reality of it. ... In describing it so I have tried to make plain that it was not simply my friend's transfigured self which affected me. ... Jesus was objectively real, not subjectively realized. And as the day passed, this sense of a third person present with us extended itself to me: I was admitted to their partnership as surely as if I had been formally introduced to the newcomer. There was nothing strained or fantastic, abnormal or supernatural about it. Quite literally it was as simple and obvious as if my friend had with him a revered and sympathetic colleague who listened to our talk and influenced our every movement by the atmosphere of his presence.

Raven later in the account would write that "the certainty then established has never faded or changed." And I've found that to be true. As my life has become financially secure and more stable in all ways, I often have worried whether the worldly comforts and support from family and friends would dilute what I had experienced. That hasn't been the case. I can experience it anew each morning as I say, "Dear Christ, forever here and near...Fill me today with all thou art" (Eddy's words). But I've had to open myself to that "here and near" presence every day. It doesn't store up! When I daily make a place for him, when I daily let his "larger, stronger, quieter life" (Lewis' words) flow in, the Saviour's strength and peace and comfort and tenderness are mine.

It does seem to me though, contrary to some denominational fervor, that this personal contact with the Saviour experience is one that doesn't fit precise definitions and that the hazard of trying to "capture" the experience in a doctrine is implying that we have some control over it. Perhaps he touches some on a different level than he does others. How else can we explain the individual, unique ways he comes to us? Some might have a sudden, soul-changing experience, as I did. Some might experience the progressive awakening that biographers attribute to MacDonald (although I guess I feel that there was more to it than he ever shared). Others might experience something similar to what Lewis describes in *Surprised by Joy* as "...when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake."

Whatever form the experience takes, the outcome the Saviour seeks is best described by Lewis in his chapter "Is Christianity Hard or Easy?":

Christ says, "Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours."

Lewis isn't describing a physical "handing over" here, some misguided exaltation in bodily suffering or sacrifice. Nor is it just some form of "handing over" achieved by public proclamation. Rather, we must "hand over the whole natural self." The abandonment of our desire for a separate self-existence is what saves. For me it took years of sorrow and frustration to fell this self-existent "tree" of pride and self-righteousness.

At the time of my saving moment, I had no concept of the changes that would be made in my life. I only knew that I could then get through what had been never-ending, grinding days where time stood still and no joy existed. As I look back on those years of trial and legalism, it has become clear to me that all of what happened was necessary in order to “kill” my natural self, the “formed” creation. In his second chapter “Faith,” Lewis explains the process this way:

Unless we really try [to keep the moral law], whatever we say there will always be at the back of our minds the idea that if we try harder next time we shall succeed in being completely good. Thus, in one sense, the road back to God is a road of moral effort, of trying harder and harder. But in another sense it is not trying that is ever going to bring us home. All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, “You must do this. I can’t.”

In recent years, I’ve encountered some Christians who are knocked down, wobbling there on all fours, so to speak, but then they struggle back up again, refusing to yield. That happened to me on several occasions during my own trying times. Now when I meet those in this experience, I just want to say, “Let go. Give up. Quit trying to save yourself. Let him do it.” I don’t say it, however; even if I did, they wouldn’t hear me. The good Master will reach them in his time and in his way.

As Raven says, what happened on the road to Damascus was not a dream for Saul of Tarsus. He did meet the Saviour. And, after several years in the deserts of Arabia, he came back to share Christ in that time and in all time through New Testament letters. MacDonald writes (in a fictional work) that there “is no saving in the lump. If a thousand be converted at once, it is every single lonely man that is converted” (Character 242). And I know that all will be converted. We all will meet the Saviour on our own particular road to Damascus. Christ is infinitely patient and infinitely persistent. Such a saving is the whole purpose of his universe. And his Father, infinite in mercy and love, would

have it no other way. As MacDonald continues, “God will have his creatures good. They cannot escape him” (Character 243).

So where am I now? Somewhere on the path that Hannah Smith describes so simply and eloquently in her chapter “Divine Union”:

There are two wills, two interests, two lives. You have not yet lost your own life that you may live only in His. Once it was “I and not Christ.” Next it was “I and Christ.” Perhaps now it is even “Christ and I.” But has it come yet to be Christ only, and not I at all?”

No, Hannah, it has not. But I want it to come to that. And every day of answering “yes” to my dear Saviour and Friend, every day of emptying myself out and letting Christ fill me, makes this reality more possible for me—as it will for everyone.



#### END NOTE

\*“Arms of Love.” Words and Music by Gary Chapman, Michael W. Smith, and Amy Grant. 1981 Meadowgreen Music Co. and Bug and Bear Music/ASCAP.