

The Last Days of Edward Payson

“Praying Payson of Portland”

EDWARD PAYSON, D.D. WAS BORN July 25, 1783 in Rindge, New Hampshire, where his father was a distinguished clergyman. For the last twenty years of his life, Edward was the pastor of The Second Church in Portland, Maine, where he died October 22, 1827, at the age of 44. His valuable and instructive *Memoir* has been read with interest by thousands.

During much of the last year of his life he suffered the most severe bodily anguish. His right arm and left side lost all power of motion, and the flesh became insensible to external applications, while internally he experienced a sensation of burning which he compared to a stream of liquid fire poured through his bones. He continued his public ministrations a part of each Sabbath for some months after this attack; and when prostrated on his dying bed, was enabled, through the marvelous displays of Divine grace, to plead, with unwonted eloquence, the cause of his Redeemer. On September 19 he dictated the following letter to his sister.

My Dear Sister,

Were I to adopt the figurative language of Bunyan, I might date this letter from the land of Beulah, of which I have been for some weeks a happy inhabitant. The celestial city is full in my view. Its glories beam upon me, its breezes fan me, its odors are wafted to me, its sounds strike upon my ears, and its spirit is breathed into my heart. Nothing separates me from it but the river of death, which now appears but as an insignificant rill that may be crossed at a single step, whenever God shall give permission. The Sun of Righteousness has been gradually drawing nearer and nearer, appearing larger and brighter as He approached, and now He fills the whole hemisphere; pouring forth a flood of glory in which I seem to float like an insect in the beams of the sun; exulting, yet almost trembling, while I gaze on this excessive brightness, and wondering, with unutterable wonder, why God should deign thus to shine upon a sinful worm. A single heart and a single tongue seem altogether inadequate to my wants: I want a whole heart for every separate emotion, and a whole tongue to express that emotion.

But why do I speak thus of myself and my feelings? Why not speak only of our God and Redeemer? It is because I know not what to say. When I would speak of them, my words are all swallowed up. I can only tell you what effects their presence produces, and even of these I can tell you but very little. Oh, my sister, my sister! Could you but know what awaits the Christian; could you only, know so much as I know, you could not refrain from rejoicing, and even leaping for joy. Labors, trials, troubles would be nothing: you would rejoice in afflictions, and glory in tribulations; and, like Paul and Silas, sing God's praises in the darkest night, and in the deepest dungeon. You have known a little of my trials and conflicts, and know that they have been neither few nor small; and I hope this glorious termination of them will serve to strengthen your faith, and elevate your hope.

And now, my dear, DEAR sister, farewell. Hold on your Christian course but a few days longer, and you will meet, in heaven,

Your happy and affectionate brother,
Edward Payson

September 21, he exclaimed, “Oh, what a blessed thing it is to lose one's will! Since I have lost my will, I have found happiness. There can be no such thing as disappointment to me, for I have no desires but that God's will may be accomplished.”

“It sounds so flat, when people tell me that it is *just* for God to afflict me, as if justice did not require infinitely more.”

He was asked, "Do you feel yourself reconciled?"—"Oh! That is too cold. I rejoice, I triumph! And this happiness will endure as long as God Himself, for it consists in admiring and adoring Him."

"I can find no words to express my happiness. I seem to be swimming in a river of pleasure, which is carrying me on to the great fountain."

Sabbath morning, Sept. 23, he said, "Last night I had a full, clear view of Death, as the king of terrors; now he comes and crowds the poor sinner to the very verge of the precipice of destruction, and then pushes him down headlong! But I felt that I had nothing to do with this; and I loved to sit like an infant at the feet of Christ, who saved *me* from this fate. I felt that death was disarmed of all its terrors; all he could do would be to touch me, and let my soul loose to go to my Savior."

"I am more and more convinced that the happiness of heaven is a benevolent happiness. In proportion as my joy has increased, I have been filled with intense love to all creatures. I long to measure out a full cup of happiness to everybody, but Christ wisely keeps that prerogative in His own hands."

His exertions in conversing with visitors greatly increased his sufferings, but he could not refrain.

To a young convert he said, "You will have to go through many conflicts and trials; you must be put in the furnace, and tempted, and tried, in order to show you what is in your heart. Sometimes it will seem as if Satan had you in his power, and that the more you struggle and pray against sin, the more it prevails against you. But when you are thus tried and desponding, remember me; I have gone through all this, and now you see the end."

"Christians might avoid much trouble and inconvenience, if they would only believe what they profess — that God is able to make them happy without anything else. They imagine that if such a dear friend were to die, or such and such blessings to be removed, they should be miserable; whereas God can make them a thousand times happier without them. To mention my own case — God has been depriving me of one blessing after another; but, as everyone was removed, He has come in and filled up its place; and now, when I am a cripple, and not able to move, I am happier than ever I was in my life before, or ever expected to be; and, if I had believed this twenty years ago, I might have been spared much anxiety."

Fearing that his strength would not allow him to converse individually with all the members of his congregation, he directed invitations to be given from the pulpit, that they would visit him in classes. To the *heads of families* he spoke thus:

"It has often been remarked that people who have been into the other world, cannot come back to tell us what they have seen; but I am so near the eternal world, that I can see almost as clearly as if I were there; and I see enough to satisfy myself, at least, of the truth of the doctrines which I have preached. I do not know that I should feel at all surer, had I been really there.

"It is always interesting to see others in a situation in which we know that we must shortly be placed ourselves; and we all know that we must die. And to see a poor creature, when, after an alternation of hopes and fears, he finds that his disease is mortal, and death comes to tear him away from everything he loves, and crowds, and crowds him to the very verge of the precipice of destruction, and then thrusts him down headlong — there he is, cast into an unknown world; no friend, no Savior to receive him.

"Oh, how different is this from the state of a man who is prepared to die. He is not obliged to crowd reluctantly along; but the other world comes like a great magnet, to draw him away from this; and he knows that he is going to enjoy — and not only knows, but begins to taste it — perfect happiness; forever and ever; forever and ever!

"And now God is in this room; I see Him, and oh, how unspeakably lovely and glorious does He appear — worthy of ten thousand thousand hearts, if we had them! He is here, and hears me pleading with the creatures that He has made, whom He preserves, and loads with blessings, to

love Him. And oh, how terrible does it appear to me, to sin against this God; to set up our wills in opposition to His; and when we awake in the morning, instead of thinking, ‘What shall I do to please my God today?’ to inquire, ‘What shall I do to please myself today?’” After a short pause he continued, “It makes my blood run cold to think how inexpressibly miserable I should now be without religion. To lie here, and see myself tottering on the verge of destruction! Oh, I should be distracted! And when I see my fellow creatures liable every moment to be reduced to this situation, I am in an agony for them, that they may escape their danger before it be too late.”

He afterwards said, “I am always sorry when I say anything to anyone who comes in: it seems so inadequate to what I wish to express. The words sink right down under the weight of the meaning I wish to convey.”

On another occasion, “I find no satisfaction in looking at anything I have done; I want to leave all this behind — it is nothing — and fly to Christ to be clothed in His righteousness.”

Again, “I have done nothing myself. I have not fought, but Christ has fought for me; I have not run, but Christ has carried me; I have not worked, but Christ has wrought in me — Christ has done all.”

“Oh! The lovingkindness of God — His lovingkindness! This afternoon, while I was meditating on it, the Lord seemed to pass by, and proclaim Himself, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious!’ Oh, how gracious! Try to conceive of that, His *lovingkindness*, as if it were not enough to say kindness, but — *loving-kindness*. What must be the lovingkindness of God, who is Himself infinite love!”

“It seemed this afternoon as if Christ said to me, ‘You have often wondered and been impatient at the way by which I have led you; but what do you think of it now?’ And I was cut to the heart, when I looked back and saw the wisdom and goodness by which I had been guided, that I could ever for a moment distrust His love!”

Speaking of the temper requisite to the right discharge of ministerial duty, he said: “I never was fit to say a word to a sinner, except when I had a broken heart myself; when I was subdued and melted into penitence, and felt as though I had just received pardon to my own soul, and when my heart was full of tenderness and pity.”

As *the young men* of his congregation assembled in his chamber, he thus addressed them:

“My Young Friends, You will all one day be obliged to embark on the same voyage on which I am just embarking; and as it has been my especial employment, during my past life, to recommend to you a Pilot to guide you through this voyage, I wished to tell you what a precious Pilot He is, that you may be induced to choose Him for yours. I felt desirous that you might see that the religion I have preached can support me in death. You know that I have many ties which bind me to earth — a family to whom I am strongly attached, and a people whom I love almost as well — but the other world acts like a much stronger magnet, and draws my heart away from this. Death comes every night, and stands by my bedside in the form of terrible convulsions, every one of which threatens to separate the soul from the body. These continue to grow worse and worse, until every bone is almost dislocated with pain, leaving me with the certainty that I shall have it all to endure again the next night. Yet, while my body is thus tortured, the soul is perfectly, perfectly happy and peaceful — more happy than I can possibly express to you. I lie here, and feel these convulsions extending higher and higher; but my soul is filled with joy unspeakable. I seem to swim in a flood of glory which God pours down upon me. And I know, I *know*, that my happiness is but begun; I cannot doubt that it will last forever. And now is this all a delusion? Is it a delusion, that can fill the soul to overflowing with joy in such circumstances? If so, it is surely a delusion better than any reality. But no, it is not a delusion; I feel that it is not. I do not merely know that I *shall* enjoy all this — *I enjoy it now*.

“My young friends, were I master of the whole world, what could it do for me like this? Were all its wealth at my feet, and all its inhabitants striving to make me happy, what could they do for me? Nothing! Nothing. Now, all this happiness I trace back to the religion which I have

preached, and to the time when that great change took place in my heart which I have often told you is necessary to salvation; and I now tell you again, that without this change, you cannot, no, you *cannot*, see the kingdom of God.

“And now, standing, as I do, on the ridge which separates the two worlds; feeling what intense happiness or misery the soul is capable of sustaining; judging of your capacities by my own, and believing that those capacities will be filled to the very brim with joy or wretchedness forever; can it be wondered at, that my heart yearns over you, my children, that you may choose life and not death? Is it to be wondered at, that I long to present every one of you with a full cup of happiness, and see you drink it; and that I long to have you make the same choice which I made, and from which springs all my happiness?”

While speaking of the rapturous views he had of the heavenly world, he was asked if it did not seem almost like the clear light of vision, rather than that of faith. “Oh!” he replied, “I don’t know — it is too much for the poor eyes of my soul to bear! They are almost blinded with the excessive brightness. All I want is to be a mirror, to reflect some of those rays to those around me.”

A friend, with whom he had been conversing on his extreme bodily sufferings, and his high spiritual joys, remarked — “I presume it is no longer incredible to you, if ever it was, that martyrs should rejoice and praise God in the flames and on the rack.” “No,” said he, “I can easily believe it. I have suffered twenty times — yes, to speak within bounds — twenty times as much as I could in being burnt at the stake, while my joy in God so abounded as to render my sufferings not only tolerable, but welcome. *‘The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed.’*”

At another time, “God is literally now my all in all. While he is present with me, no event can in the least diminish my happiness; and were the whole world at my feet, trying to minister to my comfort, they could not add one drop to the cup.”

“It seems as if the promise, ‘God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,’ was already fulfilled to me, as it respects tears of sorrow. I have no tears to shed now, but those of love, and joy, and thankfulness.”

At one time he was heard to break forth in the following soliloquy: “What an assemblage of motives to holiness does the Gospel present! I am a Christian — what then? Why, I am a redeemed sinner — a pardoned rebel — all through grace, and by the most wonderful means which infinite wisdom could devise. I am a Christian — what then? Why, I am a temple of God, and surely I ought to be pure and holy. I am a Christian — what then? I am a child of God, and ought to be filled with filial love, reverence, joy, and gratitude. I am a Christian — what then? Why, I am a disciple of Christ, and must imitate Him who was meek and lowly in heart, and pleased not Himself. I am a Christian — what then? Why, I am an heir of heaven, and hastening on to the abodes of the blessed, to join the full choir of glorified ones, in singing the song of Moses and the Lamb; and surely I ought to learn that song on earth.”

To Mrs. Payson, who, while ministering to him, had observed, “Your head feels hot, and seems to be distended,” he replied, “It seems as if the soul disdained such a narrow prison, and was determined to break through with an angel’s energy, and I trust with no small portion of an angel’s feeling, until it mounts on high.”

Again, “It seems as if my soul had found a pair of new wings, and was so eager to try them, that, in her fluttering, she would rend the fine network of the body to pieces.”

At another time, “My dear, I should think it might encourage and strengthen you, under whatever trials you may be called to endure, to remember me. Oh! You must believe that it will be great peace at last.”

At another time, he said to her, “After I am gone you will find many little streams of beneficence pouring in upon you, and you will perhaps say, ‘I wish my dear husband were here

to know this.' My dear, you may think that I do know it by anticipation, and praise God for it now."

"Hitherto I have viewed God as a fixed star, bright indeed, but often intercepted by clouds; but now He is coming nearer and nearer, and spreads into a Sun so vast and gracious, that the sight is too dazzling for flesh and blood to sustain." I see clearly that all these same glorious and dazzling perfections, which now only serve to kindle my affections into a flame, and to melt down my soul into the same blessed image, would burn and scorch me like a consuming fire, if I were an impenitent sinner."

On Sabbath, October 21, his last agony commenced. This holy man, who had habitually said of his racking pains, "These are God's arrows, but they are all sharpened with love"—and who, in the extremity of suffering, had been accustomed to repeat, as a favorite expression, "I will bless the Lord at *all times*"—had yet the "dying strife" to encounter. Even now, he greeted those who approached his bedside with a sweet smile. Once he exclaimed, "Peace! Peace! Victory! Victory!" He looked on his wife and children, and said, almost in the words of dying Joseph to his brethren — words which he had before spoken of as having a peculiar sweetness, and which he now wished to recall to her mind — "I am going, but God will surely be with you." A little before he died, in reply to an inquiry from Mrs. Payson, he was enabled, with extreme difficulty, to articulate the words, "Faith and patience hold out."

His ruling passion was strong in death. His love for preaching was as invincible as that of the miser for gold, who dies grasping his treasure. Dr. Payson directed a label to be attached to his breast, on which should be written — "*Remember the words which I spake unto you while I was yet present with you*"; that they might be read by all who came to look at his corpse, and by which he, being dead, still spake.