"A word to honest doubters"
BOOK SEVEN

To Those Who Have Chosen

BEFORE I bring this book to a close, I should like to speak a few words to you who have made the choice.

The period immediately following the choice is as a rule not an easy one. Everything is new and strange. There is no previous experience to be guided by. One's preconceived ideas and expectations as to how it all would be, are usually found to be wrong. Great surprises and disappointments are the result. Often one feels completely disoriented and at a loss as to what to do.

One is like a newly planted tree which has not as yet struck root in its new surroundings. One has very little poise and consequently low powers of resistance. The least pressure from without seems to upset everything. Inwardly one is often helplessly subject to one's emotions. To fall or to suffer defeat brings remorse almost to the point of despair. One feels that such sin can not be forgiven, that he can not come back and ask forgiveness after having been untrue to a loving Saviour.

At other times one may be entirely emotionless. One's despair at this is just as great. Everything seems to be gone. One feels that he has dealt so carelessly with that
which God has wrought in his soul that there is nothing left of it. The Lord seems to have withdrawn Himself. He does not care any longer for one who has been so indifferent with regard to the salvation of his soul.

At such times one is also tempted to believe that the whole thing was a product of the imagination, a beautiful illusion, which went to pieces the first time it came in contact with the stern realities of life. Was it anything but emotional intoxication? As long as it lasted I naively believed that it was the work of God. Now it is all too apparent that I was a victim of self-deception. In despair one says to himself: “If this was not conversion, then it is absolutely impossible for me to be truly converted. Since this happens every time I try, it must be because I am not sincere enough in my determination to be saved.”

There is also another difficulty. Some attain a state of wonderful bliss, and that at the very moment when they surrender to God, while others experience no such joy and peace at first. On the contrary, for them it becomes a very strenuous and restless period. And some feel as though all the powers of evil have been turned loose upon them from the day they chose to surrender to God.

In the first place, one's conscience is often so tender and sore that it is almost impossible to say or do anything without feeling a sting of reproach afterwards. Such anxiety often follows these reproaches of conscience that one scarcely knows what to do with oneself. Such people feel as though they are sinning knowingly and deliberately and that the wrath of God abides upon them day and night. It is, therefore, easy for them to give up all hope and think that they are worse than everybody else and that they have undoubtedly reached the stage where it is impossible to be saved.

Others have the experience immediately after their conversion that sin tempts them as never before. Not only do the old, sinful habits tempt them worse than ever, but sins which are comparatively new present themselves with an alluring appeal. These people feel at times as though there is scarcely a sin but what they lust after it. And the only reason they do not commit it is that they are afraid of the consequences.

These people ask themselves in bewilderment and despair: What has happened to me? I thought that I had been converted to God. And I did it to get away from my old life in sin. But I am worse than I ever was. There must be something wrong with my conversion. I suppose I have grieved the Holy Spirit of God and that He has forsaken me because I am so completely dominated by the might and power of sin.

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Those people, too, who at the time of their conversion were filled with joy and peace, will, after a while, and as a rule very soon, get into deep water and encounter difficulties of various kinds. Very often they have the experience of losing their joy. This leaves them with an uncomfortable vacuum in their hearts. With the loss of their joy they feel that God, too, has forsaken them. They say with weeping Mary Magdalene at the grave of Jesus: "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him" (John 20:13).

Occasionally the blissful emotions return for a season, and grief is dispelled for the time being. Such vacillation between sunshine and shadow occurs very frequently
during this early period. And it is the cause of a great
deal of pain and anxiety.

But worse than this, at times such souls feel that their
whole new blessed life is beginning to ebb away. Not
only do their periods of joy become briefer and occur
with less frequency as time passes, but they notice that
everything pertaining to godliness in their life is quietly
fading away.

The Bible, which formerly was such a precious book,
has gradually become more and more burdensome to read.
Secret prayer, which formerly was such a great joy, has
gradually become a burden. To hear the word of God
and to assemble with the people of God were the greatest
of all joys. But this, too, has little by little lost its
attractiveness. As a result they quietly stay away from
as many meetings as they respectably can, and force
themselves to attend the rest.

And sin, which they were able to withstand with such
wonderful power during the first period of joy and
happiness, has gradually begun to exercise its former
sway again, not suddenly, but gradually and imperceptibly.
Consequently they have not paid particular attention
to it each time it happened, and as a result it has
taken place without a great deal of opposition.

Now and then they wake up and see that the things are
going the wrong way. Then they put forth tremendous
efforts, pray and read twice as much as before, and
struggle hard against their sinful habits. But only for
the time being. In a short time they are back in the
old ruts again. Then they awaken anew out of their
lethargy and exert themselves with much concern. They
are firmly determined to work up within themselves once
more, by faithful and diligent effort, the love for prayer

and the Word of God and the hatred toward sin which
they formerly had. But they do not succeed.

After vainly trying to make themselves believe that
things are not very bad, or that they will gradually
adjust themselves, they finally reach a point where they
are compelled to acknowledge that they do not love God
and do not hate sin. That is, it is clear that their conver-
sion was a complete failure. Conversion is a change of
heart, and that is precisely what has not taken place.

The question now arises as to whether the conversion
they had experienced was a true conversion. Was it not
rather what Jesus describes in the following words: “And
he that was sown upon the rocky places, this is he that
heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth it;
yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a
while?” (Matthew 13:20-21).

We comfort others with the same comfort wherewith
we have been comforted, says the apostle. That is what
I shall try to do in this connection.

First, let me remind you of what conversion really
is. To be converted is not the same as to be sinless.
Do not become confused and do not begin to despair
when you discover that your old sinful nature is still
active within you. Do not be frightened if you find that
sin tempts you worse now than it did before. You are
not the only one who has had that experience. The
Apostle Paul felt it also: “When the commandment
came, sin revived” (Romans 7:9).

To be converted is not to become sinless, but to take
a new attitude toward sin: Whereas formerly I thwarted
my own conscience and sinned deliberately, or else tried
to evade the judgment of my conscience either by excusing
my sin or making it appear laudable in some way,
now I am determined to know the truth about myself and my sins. I pray the Spirit of God to show me the truth in such a way that I can not fail to understand it. Whenever I am convinced that something in my life is contrary to the will of God, I turn to the Saviour and tell it all to Him. I cling to the plain words of Scripture: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Nor should you become confused in case you are overwhelmed with anxiety. It is easy for you to think that this is a sign that God will have nothing to do with you. You must not, however, let yourself be guided by your own thoughts or feelings. You can not rely upon them in this matter. Nay, search the Word of God and find out what God thinks of you. You will find some very plain statements: “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). God loves you. Read again the beautiful description of the love of God which Jesus gives in the parable of the prodigal son in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke.

Yes, but why am I so fearful, you say, if God loves me?

Your fear is also proof that God loves you. It, too, is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. It is not anxiety, unto God which He is working within you. Herein you misunderstand Him. He is now making you anxious with respect to sin. Such anxiety is a precious gift from God, for which later on you will be very grateful, after you have had a little more experience.

This fear, then, is not proof that there is something wrong with your conversion, but, on the contrary, very definite proof that you have been converted and have been given that truly repentant heart which fears God and desires to do nothing against Him. In this connection, too, we have a decisive passage from Paul: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

The fear which you are now experiencing is not abnormal. It is part and parcel of the salvation which you are experiencing. It has a double purpose. To help separate you from sin and to keep you close to the Saviour. Its purpose is to make you so dependent upon your merciful and mighty Saviour that you can not live without Him a single hour of the day.

Nor should you despair if you become the victim of a surprise attack by your old sinful habits, causing you to fall deeply and shamefully. It is very humiliating to your own pride to suffer such defeats. And it is even worse to remember that you are disappointing and grieving God and bringing shame upon the Name by which you are named.

I know that in such moments you are tempted to give up everything. Nevertheless, go confidently to your new Friend. He Himself says: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Listen again: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). He also says, even more encouragingly: “They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick” (Matthew 9:12). Whenever you err, you know what you should do: let yourself be washed again in the blood of Jesus. He will forgive all your mistakes and shortcomings, and look upon you as though you had never sinned.

The test of true conversion is not your ability to avoid pitfalls and defeats entirely. It is after you have been
defeated that it becomes apparent whether you have been converted or not. He who honestly goes to God when he has fallen, he is and remains in that holy and child-like fellowship with God into which repentance has brought him.

Nor should you be frightened when your blissful feelings leave you. I know from my own experience how empty and poverty-stricken you feel. But do not think that this has affected your relationship to God. You were received into fellowship with God for Jesus' sake; nothing in yourself has made you worthy of such fellowship. And you remain in His fellowship through the merits of Jesus whether you feel happy or sad, as long as you do not by insincerity close your heart to the convicting and admonishing work of the Spirit.

Your life in God does not consist in what you feel. God be praised! Your life in God is deeper than your whole emotional life, and is independent of it. That your life in God affects your emotions is true. Life in God is accompanied by very definite emotions. But not only blissful emotions, as you are so likely to think; but feelings of sorrow, pain, and anxiety as well. All this is an effect of the work of the Spirit of God. Therefore, demand nothing of Him. Permit Him rather to determine from time to time what is best for you, either happy or unhappy feelings, or an utter lack of emotions.

Whatever He works in you He does with the same object in mind: to make you dependent upon the Saviour, clinging to Him and confiding to Him all your experiences.

Nor should you give up when you imagine that your life in God is ebbing out, due to the fact that you have no desire for the Word of God or prayer and that you lust after sin even though you do not dare to practice it outwardly. You feel like a withered tree, making a display of dry branches, without the sap and power of life.

My friend, you are having a hard time of it. This I know from my own experience. But what you are now experiencing is not spiritual bankruptcy. The good work of the Spirit is unquestionably being continued in your heart. You are in the same situation that Peter was when Jesus washed his feet: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt understand hereafter" (John 13:7).

The Bible says something about God killing and making alive (Deuteronomy 32:39). It also speaks of dying in order to live with God. In describing his conversion, Paul says: "I died; and the commandment, which was unto life, this I found to be unto death" (Romans 7:10). And Jesus says that as the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die before new life can come forth, so we, too, must lose our life before we can find new life in God.

You are now experiencing this dying process. And death is terrible, no matter in what form we meet it. It is accompanied by both pain and anxiety. Do not permit yourself to become bewildered on account of this, and do not permit yourself to be led into believing that you are not on the right way. It is the Spirit who is doing His work within you. And He aims at telling you the truth, the whole, terrible truth about your sinfulness. And what you have now come to see is the truth: that you have a heart that does not love God but sin. This makes you realize how unworthy you are to live in fellowship with a holy God. This again shows you that
you are a helpless and lost sinner who needs a Saviour. You realize that you are a death-sentenced criminal and you are pleading for mercy.

Has God any way of helping me, you say, with a heart such as I actually have?

Yes. If God could not help you with the heart you have, He would not be able to save sinners at all. No man can change his own worldly, selfish, God-hating heart. God alone can do that. All He wants us to do is to come to Him with our sinful and perverted heart and show it to Him openly and frankly. And the moment we do this, we receive full forgiveness from Him for all our sinfulness, for Jesus' sake.

Very well, you say, but then I should experience some of that change which God has wrought in my heart. But I see nothing of it. It is now a long time since I yielded to God, but my heart is the same: worldly, selfish, with no desire for prayer and the Word of God, but with a terrible lust after sin. Does not that show that God has not changed my heart?

No, by no means! God has, as shown above, already brought about a great change in your attitude (see pages 136 and 137). But it may be that God has not yet finished His work in your heart. And you will have to reconcile yourself to this. He puts to death before He makes alive. He humiliates before He exalts.

Should I not get peace and joy, you ask, if I am truly converted? Many people experience this right after their conversion. Why do not I? Is this not proof that I am not on the right way as far as my conversion is concerned?

In our day it is very natural for this question to become one of the most difficult ones for earnest, seeking souls.

It is in the air, so to speak, and openly stated by many, that if one makes a full surrender to God, one will at once be filled with peace and joy. This view seems to gain verification by the fact that not a few people are given a full measure of blissful emotions immediately after their conversion.

But this is a misunderstanding. Joyous emotions are by no means proof that a person is saved and has been made free in Christ. This is apparent from the fact that these emotions very quickly change into their very opposite, with consequent pain, sorrow, and anxiety. Yet no one on that account would condemn such a person as an apostate.

The emotional aspect must be considered in an entirely different light.

Whether a person after his conversion experiences joyful or distressing feelings, has nothing to do with the genuineness or validity of his conversion. The following apostolic words are applicable here: "The Spirit divides to each one severally even as he will" (I Corinthians 12:11). This is only one stage in the individual's divine up-bringing, and God deals with each one differently, according to his natural proclivities, the particular circumstances surrounding his conversion, and possibly other conditions, which I shall not discuss in detail here.

Surely you must understand that this is something in which you can not meddle. The Lord Himself must decide what is best for you during this early period, whether emotions of joy or of pain.

* But should not a Christian have assurance, you ask. I have no assurance. I live in a condition of almost ceaseless unrest and uncertainty. Does not that show
that there is something wrong with my relationship to God?

Indeed, a Christian should have assurance. But assurance is not a requirement for becoming a Christian. We are saved by faith, not by assurance. Assurance is not a requirement for salvation, but a result of being saved.

To have faith is to come to Christ with your sins and confess them to Him without guile. From that moment a person is saved, no matter whether he feels joy or sorrow. For it is written: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). So simple is the way of salvation.

After a person has thus been saved, he receives assurance as an extra gift, in addition to forgiveness. But do not forget that you are to receive it. It is the Holy Spirit who must work assurance in your heart.

What shall I do to receive assurance?

You should first tell God that you have not received assurance as yet and that you are waiting and longing for it. Then you should make use of the means of grace: the Word, prayer, communion, and fellowship (Acts 2:42). Through these means the Spirit will work assurance within you. And, finally, you should leave it to God to decide the time when you are to receive assurance. Do not presume to dictate to God. Furthermore, you need not be afraid to leave that matter with Him. He longs more to give you assurance than you do to receive it.

* Permit me, in conclusion, to sum up my advice to you who have chosen, but who still find yourself in a great deal of doubt and difficulty: yield yourselves to God. Do not go to God with demands, either for peace, joy, or assurance. Lay everything at the Saviour's feet and say to Him: do with me as Thou deemest best. It is enough for me that Thou wilt save me. Do it in the way that Thou seest best. I have merited nothing, and pray therefore only for grace. And I cling to Thine own words: “He that cometh to me, him will I in no wise cast out.”

There is still another little question deep down in your heart which now and then causes you trouble: Why does God proceed in this way? Why does He permit us to grope along in uncertainty instead of giving us what our souls so ardently desire?

Well, God may have various reasons. May I mention only one? That might be reason enough for God to deal with us as He does.

The salvation of a sinner consists in this: God by His Spirit convicts him of sin and leads him to confess his sin humbly and to leave it with God to be wiped out. Now, wilfulness is one of our most deeply rooted and widely prevalent sins. No sin is so hard for us to acknowledge and none harder to give up.

Observe how it follows us into the very presence of God. The sinner has been converted, has yielded to God with his sin and guilt. And this he has done in all earnestness. Notice, however, how wilfulness flourishes in the very presence of God, unacknowledged and unrestrained. Even though the sinner has admitted that he is deserving of death, nevertheless, he presents himself before God with demands. Because he has been so dutiful as to repent, therefore God must give him peace, joy, assurance. And He must do this immediately. And if He does not do so, the sinner feels almost offended!

Is it not true that this is wilfulness of a very unmigrated and unadulterated kind? It appears to me, there-
fore, that God must convict this sinner also of this great sin. And this He does most easily by delaying the gift which the sinner so impatiently demands. When a sinner gets so far that he sees his wilfulness and surrenders it to God in order to be rid of it, his heart is ready to receive the gifts he is so earnestly striving to get.

My advice is, therefore: acknowledge your impatience and your wilfulness and surrender yourself to God’s safe and gracious way of dealing with you. Every time impatience and self-will reasserts itself in your heart, do the same thing again. Then you will experience that God works in you according to His good pleasure. “He who began the good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Do not rest, however, until you receive assurance. Continue in prayer, and wait patiently for Him. “Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it” (I Thessalonians 5:24).