

Revivals And Church History :: John Cennick: Bold as a Lion

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A nine-year-old boy had been taken by his mother to visit her dying aunt. Entering the house before her, the child stopped abruptly, rooted to the spot. He had caught snatches of a conversation between two women, coming from his aunt's room.

'Mary,' said a tremulous voice which he recognised as his aunt's; 'I have something to say to you. You may think it is a lie, but indeed it is the truth. Last night the Lord stood by me and invited me to drink of the fountain of life freely.'

John stood riveted as his aunt continued: 'and I shall stand before the Lord as bold as a lion'. Had he heard correctly? 'As bold as a lion?' How could anyone stand before God as bold as a lion?

He began to tremble.

Rich, not poor

At that moment his mother entered the room and, approaching her aunt's bedside, said tearfully: 'Poor soul!' 'Who dares call me poor?' asked the dying woman, suddenly raising her voice: 'I am rich in Christ! I have got Christ! I am rich'.

Perhaps no one in that room thought of the child who stood there listening. Nor could anyone have realised the impression that the scene made on him. 'Bold as a lion', he mused: 'O that I might be assured of heaven before I die!' Many years later John recorded: 'The words she uttered indeed pierced my soul'.

Now he began to fear dying as never before, for he had no such confidence that God would ever accept him. Nor could he later recall a single waking hour in the next seven years when his aunt's dying words did not re-echo through his mind, creating unnamed longings.

Sensitive conscience

Loyal members of the Church of England, George and Anna Cennick had brought up their children strictly, insisting on rigorous Sunday observance. Born in Reading in 1718, John Cennick was much like any other little boy.

He regarded the hours spent each Sunday reciting hymns and prayers as 'the worst bondage and indeed cruelty', and he envied his friends who were free from such a burden.

Nor did daily church attendance improve the boy's behaviour. Lies dropped from his lips with the greatest of ease—until truth and falsehood meant little to him.

Looking back he described himself as an obstinate boy with a temper that could flare out of control at the slightest provocation. Petty theft and acts of disobedience were regular occurrences.

Yet despite it all, John had a sensitive conscience. If his behaviour had been particularly bad during the day he would dread to go to bed lest he should find himself in hell when he woke. Urgently he would promise God to be good the next day.

Religious though his parents were, they could not guide their child to the one who could forgive sin and cleanse the guilty conscience.

Loving the world

At thirteen John's education was over. His family were not well-off and it was essential that the boy should learn a trade. On eight separate occasions he travelled to London seeking an apprenticeship, but was unsuccessful.

So, with little to occupy him, he devoted himself to a way of life contrary to everything his parents had taught him. Good-looking and popular, John had a flair for fashionable dress and the latest style.

He buried himself in romances and thrilling tales of Roman and Greek culture, developing a strong penchant for the theatre. Only lack of money stopped him spending all his time watching the best actors of the day.

He spent hours listening to the 18th century equivalent of pop music or wasting his pittance in gambling, always hoping to increase it by a wager.

'I had forgot Jesus and everlasting ages, loving ungodliness more than goodness and to talk of lies more than righteousness', was his later comment. Yet every day, every hour, he remembered his aunt's dying words.

No relief

But if John Cennick was trying to forget God, God had not forgotten him. It was Easter 1735; Cennick was seventeen, and still without regular employment.

As he walked hurriedly along Cheapside in London, he was suddenly overtaken by an inexplicable heaviness of spirit. He felt deeply depressed.

His circumstances had not changed; they were exactly as they had been five minutes earlier. But try as he might, he could not shake off the gloom that enveloped him. Neither the theatre nor the songs he loved to sing brought any relief.

Perhaps the London air did not suit him. A spring day in the country would surely bring respite. It did not. Was God singling him out for punishment because of his careless ways? John Cennick did not know. Again and again he recalled the happy confidence with which his aunt had died.

Days turned to weeks, and weeks to months, and still blackness overclouded his naturally buoyant spirit. Returning home to Reading, he tried one distraction after another, but the stubborn heaviness remained.

He began to pray that God would come to his aid. Perhaps a religious friend would help; perhaps he should turn his back on the world and enter a monastery?

Prayers

Nights were worse than days: he woke at every slight noise, fearing it might herald the Day of Judgement.

Unwilling to face another day, he would lie in bed in the morning or spend the time pacing backwards and forwards in his room. Of one thing he was sure: his problem was a spiritual one.

Yet he feared that God would not wish to hear the desperate prayers he offered up. Sometimes he would spend long days and nights wandering across Salisbury Plain, eating little apart from the wild berries that he found there.

Two years passed in this way, and still there seemed no glimmer of light to penetrate the gloom. Cennick envied the small animals he saw scurrying across his path on his lonely walks. He wished to die, yet he feared the beyond. But now his prayers were no longer based on the grounds of any fancied merit he might offer to God but for the sake of the 'blood, tears and sufferings' of Jesus. The young man was nearing the end of his spiritual sorrows. Deciding it might be best for him to move from Reading and try to start life again elsewhere, Cennick prepared to leave his childhood scenes forever.

The Lord delivers

Then he heard the familiar toll of the church's old bell — that church he had attended daily from earliest years. He decided to slip unnoticed into its cool depths and pray once more before he left.

Kneeling there in despair, he paid little attention to the often-repeated refrain of the set prayers. Though lost in painful introspection, he suddenly caught the words of one of the Psalms: 'Great are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth him out of them all! And he that putteth his trust in God shall not be desolate'.

In the flash of a moment — a moment uncalculated on any earthly time-scale, yet infinitely expansive on the time-scale of heaven — the thought crossed his mind: 'Who more desolate than I?'

And then a surge of unutterable delight throbbed through his being: 'I was overwhelmed with joy and believed there was mercy.'

'My heart danced for joy and my dying soul revived. I heard the voice of Jesus saying, "I am thy salvation". I no more groaned under the weight of sin. The fears of hell were taken away... Christ loved me and died for me, I rejoiced in God my Saviour.'

Outstanding preacher

Later John Cennick was to express his experience in memorable words, words still to be found in many modern hymnbooks:

This is the way I long have sought
And mourned because I found it not;
My grief and burden long have been,
Because I could not cease from sin.
The more I strove against its power
I sinned and stumbled but the more;
Till late I heard my Saviour say,
'Come hither, soul, I am the Way!'

John Cennick would become one of the most outstanding preachers of the eighteenth century revival. Known as the 'Apostle of Wiltshire', because of his early evangelistic work in that county, his most important legacy was his preaching in Ireland.

Before his premature death at the age of thirty-six he had established over forty churches in the north and left behind a flourishing work in Dublin. His burden and joy had been to preach to others that gospel that had set him free from the bondage of sin.

As he himself expressed it:

Now shall I tell to sinners round
What a dear Saviour I have found.
I'll point to thy redeeming blood
And say, 'Behold the way to God.'