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Broken And Bruised Yet Not Beaten!

by Greg Gordon

An short account of the apostolic life of John Cennick

BATTERED AND BRUISED

John Cennick was punched in the nose, beaten until his shoulders were black and blue, dunked in a dirty pond, sprayed with ditch water and blackened with musket smoke when he preached. Hecklers tried to drown his voice by beating drums and pans. Or they set dogs barking by swinging a cat in a cage. They hurled dead dogs at him. In spite of this terrible opposition, he preached outdoor sermons in Wiltshire for five years. He wanted to win souls. In the life of the Church we run across men of such stature that they seem to tower over the masses of professed believers. John Cennick was used of God in such proportions that can only be labeled as "apostolic!" He was a God filled man with a God filled message. He preached "Christ Crucified" and did not relent in sharing the Scriptures with heavy words full of holy convictions. He labored amongst the Methodists, Calvinists, and finally amongst the Moravians. He was not a "denominational man" but rather was a "God appointed man" who did not shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God.

BOLD AS A LION!

"At nine years of age, he heard his dying aunt exclaim, 'Last night the Lord stood by me and invited me to drink of the fountain of life freely and I shall stand before the Lord as bold as a lion.' For years John was unable to get those words out of his head. What a privilege to be able to stand before the Lord as bold as a lion! How he wished he could be sure of the same future. He prayed, fasted, hoped for it, but found himself unable to do good. He lied and cheated and frittered his hours in spite of his best resolutions to do otherwise. One day, his heart became unbearably heavy. He entered a church to pray. As he knelt there, he seemed to hear Jesus say, 'I am your salvation.' The weight rolled off him. His desires changed. No longer did he want to fritter his time on cards. One day when he refused to play for the sake of his conscience, he was told that there was another 'stupid religious fellow' like himself. The man turned out to be a Methodist who introduced John Cennick to John Wesley. Soon John Cennick was standing under a tree in Kingswood, preaching for the Methodists.

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. Born of Quaker parents, raised in the Anglican Church, he joined the Methodist movement. But after several years with the Wesleyan Methodists, he broke with John Wesley and joined George Whitefield's Calvinist Methodists. Later he left the Calvinist Methodists for the Moravian Brethren. When clergymen complained that their churches were empty because everyone had gone to hear John, Bishop Rider replied, "Preach Christ crucified and then the people will not have to go to Cennick to hear the Gospel."

THE WAY THE HOLY PROPHETS WENT!

Here is a powerful hymn written by John Cennick. You can sense in reading this hymn the strong doctrinal convictions that man had and followed in these ways with full assurance and surrender:

Jesus, My All, To Heav'n is Gone
He whom I fix my hopes upon:
His track I see, and I'll pursue

The narrow way till him I view;

The way the holy prophets went;
The road that leads from banishment;
The King's highway of holiness;
I'll go; for all His paths are peace.

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 Savior say,
"Come hither, soul, I am the way."

Lo! Glad I come, and thou blest Lamb
Shalt take me to thee as I am;
My sinful self to thee I give;
Nothing but love shall I receive.

Then will I tell to sinners round
What a dear Savior I have found;
I'll point to thy redeeming blood.
And say, "Behold the way to God."

CROWDS SO GREAT

“Cennick preached twice daily to crowds so great that those who wished to hear must be present two or three hours before the time. All the windows were taken down so that people might hear in the burying-ground, yard and environs, yet multitudes were disappointed. On Sundays all the tops of the houses near the meeting house, all walls and windows were covered with people, and Cennick had to go in at the window, creeping over the heads of the people to reach his pulpit. Often seven or eight priests were together to hear him, and many of the Church clergy, many teachers of religion and many collegians.”

In another account we hear of his hard labors for Christ: “He ranged out over seven counties in Ireland, holding meetings in barns or fields or houses, preaching every day and often several times a day, and forming Moravian Societies. He was beaten by hoodlums, attacked by mobs, set upon by dogs, and was arrested and fined. He and his wife lived in poverty, yet were often overflowing with the joy of the Lord. He condemned sin in every form and was utterly uncompromising in his Gospel declaration.” We hear again another account of his hard, laborious trials he endured: “Cennick often addressed thousands in the open air, with rain coming down in torrents. He preached in old barns, disused cloth mills, and in village cock-pits. He slept in the old ruined church at Portmore. He sat on the roadside, cold and lonely, munching his meagre lunch of bread and cheese. If money was plentiful, he used a horse; if not, he would walk twenty miles to preach.”

Do these things sound strange to your ears? We must realize that apostolic Christianity is not free from suffering. Apostolic Christianity is Christianity that bears the Cross of Christ and follows in the sufferings of Christ. Cennick followed the path his master trod and was very familiar with suffering for the name that he counted so precious.

TO SEE GOD AS HE IS!

We have many lessons to learn from this apostolic figure in Church History. His life teaches us that “suffering” is something not disdain but embrace. His life also teaches us to cater a “boldness” for sharing the truth of Scriptures with a lost and needy world. Why are there no more modern day John Cennicks you may ask? I would simply reply when we have a man that will suffer for the gospel as much as Cennick then we will truly have another John Cennick! These Scrip

tures must have been close to this man of God's heart: "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth on you." and also, "If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf." Let us follow the captain of our salvation dear saints that was made "perfect through sufferings."

John Cennick's life ended abruptly as he passed away after having a fever in England for five days. He died at the age of thirty six! By the time of his early death, he had established over 40 churches. Matthew Wilks said of Cennick: "His Christian qualities were not less distinguishable. If unaffected humility, deadness to the world, a life of communion with God, and a cheerful reliance on a crucified Saviour constitute the real Christian, he was one of in an eminent degree. True, his language was not with the enticing words of man's wisdom; yet his doctrine and address were powerful, and found access to the hearts of thousands." George Whitefield remarked hearing of the death of Cennick: "John Cennick is now added to the happy number of those who are called to see God as He is!" May we have the same testimony of our life that as our earthly sojourn is finished we will not be shocked to see "God as He is!" May our life's bear witness of that reality on that Great Day!