

Charles Finney

• A Proud Heart •

“What are you waiting for?”



(1792-1875)

Charles Finney was a young attorney practicing law in Adams, New York, when he began to seek after the salvation of his soul. He found that the most troublesome hindrance for him in seeking God was his pride and fear of men — he was ashamed to be found reading the Bible or praying.

In 1821 while praying secretly in the woods, he found Christ and received “a retainer from the Lord to plead His cause.” His shame disappeared and Finney began a ministry of revival preaching that brought an estimated half million people to Christ. This was an amazing accomplishment in a day without loudspeakers and mass communication. The following excerpt is from his memoirs and describes how he found Christ.

ON A SABBATH EVENING in the autumn of 1821, I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at once, that if it were possible I would make my peace with God. But because I was very busy in the affairs of the office, I knew that without great firmness of purpose, I would never effectually attend to the subject. I therefore, then and there resolved, as far as possible, to avoid all business, and everything that would divert my attention, and to give myself wholly to the work of securing the salvation of my soul. I carried this resolution into execution as sternly and thoroughly as I could. I was, however, obliged to be a good deal in the office. But as the providence of God would have it, I was not much occupied either on Monday or Tuesday, and had opportunity to read my Bible and engage in prayer most of the time.

But I was very proud without knowing it. I had supposed that I had not much regard for the opinions of others, whether they thought this or that in regard to myself; and I had in fact been quite singular in attending prayer meetings, and in the degree of attention that I had paid to religion, while in Adams. In this respect I had been so singular as to lead the church at times to think that I must be an anxious inquirer. But I found, when I came to face the question, that I was very unwilling to have anyone know that I was seeking the salvation of my soul. When I prayed I would only whisper my prayer,

after having plugged the keyhole to the door, lest some one should discover that I was engaged in prayer. Before that time I had my Bible lying on the table with the lawbooks; and it never had occurred to me to be ashamed of being found reading it, anymore than I should be ashamed of being found reading any of my other books.

But after I had addressed myself in earnest to the subject of my own salvation, I kept my Bible, as much as I could, out of sight. If I was reading it when anybody came in, I would throw my lawbooks upon it to create the impression that I had not had it in my hand. Instead of being outspoken and willing to talk with anybody and everybody on the subject as before, I found myself unwilling to converse with anybody. I did not want to see my minister, because I did not want to let him know how I felt, and I had no confidence that he would understand my case and give me the direction that I needed. For the same reasons I avoided conversation with the elders of the church, or with any of the Christian people. I was ashamed to let them know how I felt, on the one hand; and on the other, I was afraid they would misdirect me. I felt myself shut up to the Bible.

During Monday and Tuesday my convictions increased; but still it seemed as if my heart grew harder. I could not shed a tear; I could not pray. I had no opportunity to pray above my breath; and frequently I felt that if I could be alone where I could use my voice and let

myself out, I would find relief in prayer. I was shy, and avoided, as much as I could, speaking to anybody on any subject. I endeavored, however, to do this in a way that would excite no suspicion, in any mind, that I was seeking the salvation of my soul.

Tuesday night I had become very nervous; and in the night a strange feeling came over me as if I was about to die. I knew that if I did I would sink down to hell; but I quieted myself as best I could until morning.

At an early hour I started for the office. But just before I arrived at the office, something seemed to confront me with questions like these: indeed, it seemed as if the inquiry was within myself, as if an inward voice said to me, “What are you waiting for? Did you not promise to give your heart to God? And what are you trying to do? Are you endeavoring to work out a righteousness of your own?”

Just at this point the whole question of gospel salvation opened to my mind in a manner most marvelous to me at the time. I think I then saw, as clearly as I ever have in my life, the reality and fullness of the atonement of Christ. I saw that His work was a finished work; and that instead of having or needing any righteousness of my own to recommend me to God, I had to submit myself to the righteousness of God through Christ. Gospel salvation seemed to me to be an offer of something to be accepted; and that it was full and complete; and that all

that was necessary on my part was to get my own consent to give up my sins and accept Christ. Salvation, it seemed to me, instead of being a thing to be wrought out, by my own works, was a thing to be found entirely in the Lord Jesus Christ, who presented Himself before me as my God and my Savior.

Without being distinctly aware of it, I had stopped in the street right where the inward voice seemed to arrest me. How long I remained in that position I cannot say. But after this distinct revelation had stood for some little time before my mind, the question seemed to be put, "Will you accept it now, today?" I replied, "Yes; I will accept it today, or I will die in the attempt."

North of the village, and over a hill, lay a piece of woods, in which I was in the almost daily habit of walking, more or less, when it was pleasant weather. It was now October, and the time was past for my frequent walks there. Nevertheless, instead of going to the office, I turned and bent my course toward the woods, feeling that I must be alone, and away from all human eyes and ears, so that I could pour out my prayer to God.

But still my pride must show itself. As I went over the hill, it occurred to me that someone might see me and suppose that I was going away to pray. Yet probably there was not a person on earth that would have suspected such a thing, had he seen me going. But so great was my pride, and so much was I possessed with the fear

of man, that I recollect that I skulked along under the fence, till I got so far out of sight that no one from the village could see me. I then penetrated into the woods, I should think, a quarter of a mile, went over on the other side of the hill, and found a place where some large trees had fallen across each other, leaving an open place between. There I saw I could make a kind of closet. I crept into this place and knelt down for prayer. As I turned to go up into the woods, I recollect to have said, "I will give my heart to God, or I never will come down from there." I recollect repeating this as I went up — "I will give my heart to God before I ever come down again."

But when I attempted to pray I found that my heart would not pray. I had supposed that if I could only be where I could speak aloud, without being overheard, I could pray freely. But lo! when I came to try, I was dumb; that is, I had nothing to say to God; or at least I could say but a few words, and those without heart. In attempting to pray I would hear a rustling in the leaves, as I thought, and would stop and look up to see if somebody were not coming. This I did several times.

Finally I found myself verging fast to despair. I said to myself, "I cannot pray. My heart is dead to God, and will not pray." I then reproached myself for having promised to give my heart to God before I left the woods. When I came to try, I found I could not give my heart to God. My inward soul hung back, and there was no going

out of my heart to God. I began to feel deeply that it was too late; that it must be that I was given up of God and was past hope.

The thought was pressing me of the rashness of my promise, that I would give my heart to God that day or die in the attempt. It seemed to me as if that was binding upon my soul; and yet I was going to break my vow. A great sinking and discouragement came over me, and I felt almost too weak to stand upon my knees.

Just at this moment I again thought I heard someone approach me, and I opened my eyes to see whether it were so. But right there the revelation of my pride of heart, as the great difficulty that stood in the way, was distinctly shown to me. An overwhelming sense of my wickedness in being ashamed to have a human being see me on my knees before God, took such powerful possession of me, that I cried at the top of my voice, and exclaimed that I would not leave that place if all the men on earth and all the devils in hell surrounded me. "What!" I said, "such a degraded sinner as I am, on my knees confessing my sins to the great and holy God; and ashamed to have any human being, and a sinner like myself, find me on my knees endeavoring to make my peace with my offended God!" The sin appeared awful, infinite. It broke me down before the Lord.

Just at that point this passage of Scripture seemed to drop into my mind with a flood of light: "Then shall ye

go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you. Then shall ye seek Me and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart.” I instantly seized hold of this with my heart. I had intellectually believed the Bible before; but never had the truth been in my mind that faith was a voluntary trust instead of an intellectual state. I was as conscious as I was of my existence, of trusting at that moment in God’s veracity. Somehow I knew that that was a passage of Scripture, though I do not think I had ever read it. I knew that it was God’s word, and God’s voice, as it were, that spoke to me. I cried to Him, “Lord, I take You at Your word. Now You know that I do search for You with all my heart, and that I have come here to pray to You; and You have promised to hear me.”

That seemed to settle the question that I could then, that day, perform my vow. The Spirit seemed to lay stress upon that idea in the text, “When you search for Me with all your heart.” The question of when, that is of the present time, seemed to fall heavily into my heart. I told the Lord that I would take Him at His word; that He could not lie, and that therefore I was sure that He heard my prayer, and that He would be found of me.

He then gave me many other promises, both from the Old and the New Testament, especially some most precious promises respecting our Lord Jesus Christ. I never can, in words, make any human being understand how precious and true those promises appeared to me. I

took them one after the other as infallible truth, the assertions of God who could not lie. They did not seem so much to fall into my intellect as into my heart, to be put within the grasp of the voluntary powers of my mind; and I seized hold of them, appropriated them, and fastened upon them with the grasp of a drowning man.

I continued thus to pray and to receive and appropriate promises for a long time, I know not how long. I prayed till my mind became so full that, before I was aware of it, I was on my feet and tripping up the ascent toward the road. The question of my being converted had not so much as arisen to my thought; but as I went up, brushing through the leaves and bushes, I recollect saying with great emphasis, “If I am ever converted, I will preach the Gospel.”¹



The obstacle that many people face in coming to Christ is their pride. Like Charles Finney, you may have wanted to receive Christ, but your pride has hindered you. However, when Finney saw the pride of his heart, it created in him a greater sense of need for God, and it was at that point that he searched for Him with *all* of his heart and found Him.

Don't be dismayed. God has a specific word for a proud person: ⁶“Therefore He says: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”⁷ Therefore *submit*

to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸*Draw near* to God and He will draw near to you. *Cleanse* your hands, you sinners; and *purify* your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:6-8).

The way to break through your pride is simply to humble yourself and pray like the sinful tax collector did in Luke 18:13-14: ¹³“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘*God be merciful to me a sinner!*’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other [the proud Pharisee]; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” What are you waiting for? Do it now. “Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

Christ is waiting at the door of your heart to come in, so there is only one thing for you to do — *open* the door and He will come in: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20).