

A. B. Simpson

• A Desperate Situation •

“My eyes fell upon a sentence which opened for me the gates of life eternal.”



(1843-1919)

The spiritual influence of Albert Benjamin Simpson has not only touched the movement he founded, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, but it has also affected seeking Christians from all evangelical persuasions. Simpson's early roots go back to a godly family. Both his father and mother were deeply devoted to the Lord. They lived their daily life according to the strictest principles of the Puritans. Indeed, family worship was often the occasion for reading the following classic Puritan writings: Thomas Boston's Human Nature in Its Fourfold State, Richard Baxter's The Saints' Everlasting Rest, and Philip Doddridge's The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul.

Immediately following his conversion experience, Simpson wholly surrendered himself to the Lord. His

surrender was based upon the prayer of surrender from Doddridge's book, part of which said, "The surrender will also be as entire as it is cheerful and immediate. All you are, and all you have, and all you can do, your time, your possessions, your influence over others, will be devoted to Him, that for the future it may be employed entirely for Him, and to His glory."

Yet, just before he found Christ, Simpson passed through a series of crises. One of these was a physical and nervous breakdown due to the pressures of study and domestic responsibilities. The doctor advised him that he was in "the greatest danger." In his testimony, Simpson describes the "dreadful nervousness" he passed through. It was a desperate situation, and to add to it all, he knew that he was without Christ.

During this critical time, Simpson picked up Walter Marshall's classic work, The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification. As he read, his eyes fell upon one sentence that changed the course of his whole life. Here Simpson tells in his own words how he came to this point:

MY CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH were strangely sheltered and guarded by divine providence. I recall with sacred awe many times when my life was almost miraculously preserved. On one occasion, while climbing up on the scaffolding of a building in course of erection, I stepped upon a loose board which tipped over

and plunged me into space. Instinctively throwing out my hands, I caught a piece of timber, one of the flooring joists, and desperately held on, crying for assistance. When exhausted and about to fall, a workman caught me just in time. The fall would certainly have killed me or maimed me for life.

At another time I was thrown headlong over my horse's head as he stumbled and fell under me. When I came back to consciousness, I found him bending over me with his nose touching my face, almost as if he wanted to speak to me and encourage me. At another time I was kicked into unconsciousness by a dangerous horse, and still remember the awful struggle to recover my breath as I thought myself dying.

Once I had a remarkable escape from drowning. I had gone with one of my schoolmates in the High School to gather wild grapes on the banks of the river. After a while my companion tempted me to go in swimming, an art about which I knew nothing. In a few moments I got beyond my depth, and with an agony I shall always remember, I found myself choking under the surface. In that moment the whole of my life came before me as if in a vision, and I can well understand the stories told by drowning persons of the photograph that seems to come to their minds in the last moment of consciousness. I remember seeing as clearly as if I had read it from the printed page, the notice in the local newspaper telling of

my drowning and the grief and sorrow of my friends. Somehow God mercifully saved me. My companion was too frightened to help me, but his shouts attracted some men in a little boat a short distance away, and they pulled me out just as I was sinking for the last time, and laid me on the river bank. As I came back to consciousness a while afterwards, it seemed to me that years had passed since I was last on earth. I am sure that experience greatly deepened my spiritual earnestness.

But, like other boys, I often passed from the sublime to the ridiculous as this little incident will show. It was my good fortune to secure as a first prize in the High School an extremely handsome book which my chum, who had failed in the examination, had set his heart upon getting. He finally succeeded in tempting me by an old violin, with which he used to practice on my responsive heart, until at last I was persuaded to exchange my splendid prize for his old fiddle. The following summer I took it home and made night hideous and myself a general nuisance. I had never really succeeded in playing anything worthwhile, but there must have been somewhere in my nature a latent vein of music, and still to me the strains of the violin have a subtle inspirational power with which nothing else in music can be compared.

My first definite religious crisis came at about the age of fourteen. Prior to this I had for a good while been planning to study for the ministry. I am afraid that this

came to me in the first instance rather as a conviction of duty than a spontaneous Christian impulse. There grew up in my young heart a great conflict about my future life; naturally I rebelled against the ministry because of the restraints which it would put upon many pleasures. One irresistible desire was to have a gun and to shoot and hunt; and I reasoned that if I were a minister, it would never do for me to indulge in such pastimes.

I was cured of this in a somewhat tragic way. I had saved up a little money, earned through special jobs and carefully laid aside, and one day I stole off to the town and invested it in a shot gun. For a few days I had the time of my life. I used to steal out to the woods with my forbidden idol and then with my sister's help smuggle it back to the attic. One day, however, my mother found it, and there was a never-to-be-forgotten scene. Her own brother had lost his life through the accidental discharge of a gun, and I knew and should have remembered that such things were prohibited in our family. It was a day of judgment for me; and when that wicked weapon was brought from its hiding place, I stood crushed and confounded as I was sentenced to the deep humiliation of returning it to the man from whom I bought it, losing not only my gun but my money too.

That tragedy settled the question of the ministry. I soon after decided to give up all side issues and prepare myself if I could only find a way to preach the Gospel.

But as yet the matter had not even been introduced in the family. One day, however, my father in his quiet, grave way, with my mother sitting by, called my elder brother and myself into his presence and began to explain that the former had long been destined to the ministry and that the time had now come when he should begin his studies and prepare to go to college. I should say that at this time we both had an excellent common school education. My father added that he had a little money, rescued from the wrecked business of many years before, now slowly coming in, which would be sufficient to give an education to one but not both of his boys. He quietly concluded that it would be my duty to stay at home on the farm while my brother went to college. I can still feel the lump that rose in my throat as I stammered out my acquiescence. Then I ventured with broken words and stammering tongue to plead that they would consent to my getting an education if I could work it out without asking anything from them but their approval and blessing. I had a little scheme of my own to teach school and earn the money for my education. But even this I did not dare to divulge, for I was but a lad of less than fourteen. I remember the quiet trembling tones with which my father received my request and said, "God bless you, my boy."

So the struggle began, and I shall never cease to thank God that it was a hard one. Someone has said, "Many people succeed because success is thrust upon

them,” but the most successful lives are those that began without a penny. Nothing under God has ever been a greater blessing to me than the hard places that began with me more than half a century ago, and have not yet ended.

For the first few months my brother and I took lessons in Latin, Greek and higher mathematics from a retired minister and then from our kind pastor, who was a good scholar and ready to help us in our purpose. Later I pursued my studies in Chatham High School, but the strain was too great, and I went back to my father’s house a physical wreck. Then came a fearful crash in which it seemed to me the very heavens were falling. After retiring one night suddenly a star appeared to blaze before my eyes; and as I gazed, my nerves gave way. I sprang from my bed trembling and almost fainting with a sense of impending death, and then fell into a congestive chill of great violence that lasted all night and almost took my life. A physician told me that I must not look at a book for a whole year for my nervous system had collapsed, and I was in the greatest danger. There followed a period of mental and physical agony which no language can describe. I was possessed with the idea that at a certain hour I was to die; and every day as that hour drew near, I became prostrated with dreadful nervousness, watching in agonized suspense till the hour passed, and wondering that I was still alive.

One day the situation became so acute that nothing could gainsay it. Terrified and sinking, I called my father to my bedside and besought him to pray for me, for I felt I was dying. Worst of all I had no personal hope in Christ. My whole religious training had left me without any conception of the sweet and simple Gospel of Jesus Christ. The God I knew was a being of great severity, and my theology provided in some mysterious way for a wonderful change called the new birth or regeneration, which only God could give to the soul. How I longed and waited for that change to come, but it had not yet arrived. Oh, how my father prayed for me that day, and how I cried in utter despair for God to spare me just long enough to be saved!

After that dreadful sense of sinking, at last a little rest came, and the crisis was over for another day. I looked at the clock, and the hour had passed. I believed that God was going to spare me just one day more, and that I must strive and pray for salvation that whole day as a doomed man. How I prayed and besought others to pray, and almost feared to go to sleep that night lest I should lose a moment from my search for God and eternal life; but the day passed, and I was not saved. It now seems strange that there was no voice there to tell me the simple way of believing in the promise and accepting the salvation fully provided and freely offered. How often since then it has been my delight to tell poor sinners that —

“We do not need at Mercy’s gate
To knock and weep, and watch and wait;
For Mercy’s gifts are offered free,
And she has waited long for thee.”

After that, as day after day passed, I rallied a little, and my life seemed to hang upon a thread, for I had the hope that God would spare me long enough to find salvation if I only continued to seek it with all my heart. At length one day, in the library of my old minister and teacher, I stumbled upon an old musty volume called *Marshall’s Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*. As I turned the leaves, my eyes fell upon a sentence which opened for me the gates of life eternal. It is this in substance: “The first good work you will ever perform is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Until you do this, all your works, prayers, tears, and good resolutions are vain. To believe on the Lord Jesus is just to believe that He saves you according to His Word, that He receives and saves you here and now, for He has said — ‘Him that comes to Me I will in no wise cast out.’ The moment you do this, you will pass into eternal life, you will be justified from all your sins, and receive a new heart and all the gracious operations of the Holy Spirit.”

To my poor bewildered soul this was like the light from heaven that fell upon Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus. I immediately fell upon my knees, and look-

ing up to the Lord, I said, “Lord Jesus, You have said — Him that comes to Me I will in no wise cast out. You know how long and earnestly I have tried to come, but I did not know how. Now I come the best I can, and I dare to believe that You do receive me and save me, and that I am now Your child, forgiven and saved simply because I have taken You at Your word. Abba Father, You are mine, and I am Yours.”

It is needless to say that I had a fight of faith with the great Adversary before I was able to get out all these words and dared to make this confession of my faith; but I had no sooner made it and set my seal to it than there came to my heart that divine assurance that always comes to the believing soul, for “He who believes has the witness in himself.” I had been seeking the witness without believing, but from the moment that I dared to believe the Word, I had the assurance that —

“The Spirit answers to the blood
And tells me I am born of God.” ¹

Like A. B. Simpson, you may find yourself in a desperate situation, whatever it may be. Perhaps you have been brought face to face with the realities of life and even death itself — yet you have still not received

Christ into your life. At this juncture, you need to see that God works in desperate situations. In fact, God comes to us in these times.

It was the apostle Paul who desperately cried out in his personal state of defeat and failure, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24). The answer came instantly, out of his own mouth, “I thank God *through* Jesus Christ.” Immediately, he was delivered out of his despair into the rest and peace of knowing that Jesus Christ is God’s unique answer for desperate souls. Now everything is handled and processed *through* Jesus Christ. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Just as Paul and A. B. Simpson did, let Christ come in now, and then let Him do everything *in* you and *for* you forever!

