

Self-Righteously Trying to Save Myself:

David Brainerd's Testimony

by James Jennings | illbehonest.com

When reading the *Life and Diary of David Brainerd* I was struck by how self-righteous Brainerd was prior to being saved. Many of the struggles Brainerd expressed and wrestled with are the exact same things that the self-righteous person today is ensnared by. No doubt, I am sure you could find someone a thousand years ago who wrestled with these same aspects of trying to save themselves by their own works. Why? Because all of humanity is fallen, and in lost mankind's fallenness they so often seek subtle ways to try to earn their own salvation. My hope in posting these extracts from the book and commenting on them is that those who are asking these similar questions will yet find one more testimony of a man who found rest in Christ. Rest, not because he was able to qualify himself to God, but because he gave up and trusted in the perfect qualifications of Jesus Christ on his behalf.

All of the following extracts are taken from sections on pages 58 to 70 of the book.

When about twenty years of age, I applied myself to study; and was now engaged more than ever in the duties of religion. I became very strict, and watchful over my thoughts, words, and actions; and thought I must be sober indeed, because I designed to devote myself to the ministry; and imagined I did dedicate myself to the Lord.

My manner of life was now exceeding regular, and full of religion, such as it was; for *I read my Bible more than twice through in less than a year*, spent much time every day in prayer and other secret duties, gave great attention to the word preached, and endeavored to my utmost to retain it. So much concerned was I about religion, that I agreed with some young persons to meet privately on sabbath evenings for religious exercises, and thought myself sincere in these duties... *In short, I had a very good outside, and rested entirely on my duties, though not sensible of it.*

David says it well, "I had a very good outside", one in which he was filling his life with religious duties, but "rested entirely on my duties", trusting in them for his hope of salvation. He says, "though not sensible of it"; as in he didn't realize he was self-righteous because he was blinded by it. He goes on to explain:

Some time in the beginning of winter, 1738, it pleased God, on one sabbath-day morning, as I was walking out for some secret duties, to give me on a sudden such a sense of my danger, and the wrath of God, that I stood amazed, and *my former good frames, that I had pleased myself with*, all presently vanished. From the view I had of my sin and vileness, I was much distressed all that day, fearing the vengeance of God would soon overtake me. I was much dejected, kept much alone, and sometimes envied the birds and beasts their happiness, because they were not exposed to eternal misery, as I evidently saw I was. And thus I lived from day to day, being frequently in

great distress: sometimes there appeared mountains before me to obstruct my hopes of mercy; and the work of conversion appeared so great, that I thought I should never be the subject of it. I used, however, to pray and cry to God, and *perform other duties with great earnestness; and thus hoped by some means to make the case better.*

And though, hundreds of times, I renounced all pretenses of any worth in my duties, as I thought, even while performing them, and often confessed to God that I deserved nothing, for the very best of them, but eternal condemnation; *yet still I had a secret hope of recommending myself to God by my religious duties.* When I prayed affectionately, and *my heart seemed in some measure to melt, I hoped God would be thereby moved to pity me, my prayers then looked with some appearance of goodness in them,* and I seemed to mourn for sin. And then I could in some measure venture on the mercy of God in Christ, as I thought, though the preponderating thought, *the foundation of my hope, was some imagination of goodness in my heart-meltings,* flowing of affections in duty, extraordinary enlargements. Though at times the gate appeared so very strait, that it looked next to impossible to enter, yet, at other times, I flattered myself that it was not so very difficult, and hoped I should by diligence and watchfulness soon gain the point. Sometimes after enlargement in duty and considerable affection, I hoped I had made a good step towards heaven; imagined that God was affected as I was, and that he would hear such sincere cries, as I called them. And so sometimes, when *I withdrew for secret duties in great distress, I returned comfortable; and thus healed myself with my duties.*

Notice how Brainerd said that he was hoping that the Lord was looking at him and his "heart-meltings" as something by which the Lord will now save him because of those feelings being present. The self-righteous man is constantly doing these "secret duties" and finding a false comfort in doing them, as Brainerd said above. He went on from this point still trying to save himself, but getting a greater glimpse of his wickedness, he says:

I set apart a day for secret fasting and prayer, and spent the day in almost incessant cries to God for mercy, that he would open my eyes to see the evil of sin, and the way of life by Jesus Christ. And God was pleased that day to make considerable discoveries of my heart to me. *But still I trusted in all the duties I performed;* though there was no manner of goodness in them, there being in them no respect to the glory of God, nor any such principle in my heart. Yet, God was pleased to make my endeavors that day a means to show me my helplessness in some measure.

Again, he says he "still trusted in all the duties I performed" and not in the perfect performance of Jesus Christ. He goes on:

Sometimes I was greatly encouraged, and imagined that God loved me, and was pleased with me; and thought I should soon be fully reconciled to God. *But the whole was founded on mere presumption, arising from enlargement in duty, or flowing of affections, or some good resolutions,* and the like...

Notice, when he did more works, that is "enlargement in duty" he had a false assurance that God loved him because of his performance or zealous resolution that he made, such as fasting and praying.

Thus, though I daily longed *for greater conviction of sin, supposing that I must see more of my dreadful state in order to a remedy*; yet when the discoveries of my vile, hellish heart, were made to me, the sight was so dreadful, and showed me so plainly my exposedness to damnation, that I could not endure it. – *I constantly strove after whatever qualifications I imagined others obtained before the reception of Christ, in order to recommend me to his favour...*

Two of the things just mentioned are common threads in the proud and self-righteous person. The first being this idea that one needs "*greater conviction of sin*" and that then somehow they will be prepared and ready to be saved. The second being this temptation to look at "*whatever qualifications*"..."*others obtained before the reception of Christ*" and seeking to have those for yourself. The self-righteous man is constantly looking at other's testimonies and comparing his own to that of the other. As he seeks to imitate the feelings and experiences the other had prior to conversion, he deceives himself to think he is close to now being saved because of the similarities he has with that person before they were saved.

Again, none of this is looking to Christ, it is all a works based salvation that is hopeless. In the following extracts you will see how he continued with this mindset of trying to prepare himself for saving mercy, rather than trust in the perfect sacrifice that has been prepared for us in Jesus Christ.

When at any time *I took a view of my convictions, and thought the degree of them to be considerable, I was accustomed to trust in them*; but this confidence, and the hopes of soon making some notable advances towards deliverance, would ease my mind, and I soon became more senseless and remiss: but then again, when I discerned my convictions to grow languid, and I thought them about to leave me, this immediately alarmed and distressed me.

Being sensible of the necessity of a deep humiliation in order to a saving close with Christ, *I used to set myself to work in my own heart those convictions that were requisite in such an humiliation...*

I was accustomed to tell God in my prayers, that now I had those very dispositions of soul that he required, and on which he showed mercy to others, and thereupon to beg and plead for mercy to me. But when I found no relief, and was still oppressed with guilt, and fears of wrath, my soul was in a tumult, and my heart rose against God, as dealing hardly with me...

Thus, scores of times, I vainly imagined myself humbled and prepared for saving mercy.

Brainerd goes on to describe some of the faults that he found with God, and this too is often common with the self-righteous person. They view themselves as faultless, and God as the one at fault and to blame.

The many disappointments, great distresses, and perplexity I met with, put me into a most horrible frame of contesting with the Almighty; with an inward vehemence and virulence finding fault with his ways of dealing with mankind. *I found great fault with the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity; and my wicked heart often wished for some other way of salvation, than by Jesus Christ.*

I used before to imagine, *that my heart was not so bad as the Scriptures and some other books represented it.* Sometimes I used to take much pains to work it up into a good frame, an humble submissive disposition; and hoped there was then some goodness in me.

Brainerd said, "my heart was especially irritated with the following things":

- (1) The strictness of the divine law. For I found it was impossible for me, after my utmost pains, to answer its demands.
- (2) Another thing was, that faith alone was the condition of salvation; that God would not come down to lower terms, and that he would not promise life and salvation upon my sincere and hearty prayers and endeavors.
- (3) Another thing was, that I could not find out what faith was; or what it was to believe, and come to Christ. I read the calls of Christ to the weary and heavy laden; but could find no way that he directed them to come in. I thought I would gladly come, if I knew how, though the path of duty were never so difficult. I read Mr. Stoddard's Guide to Christ, (which I trust was, in the hand of God, the happy means of my conversion) and my heart rose against the author; for though he told me my very heart all along under convictions, and seemed to be very beneficial to me in his directions; *yet here he failed, he did not tell me any thing I could do that would bring me to Christ,* but left me as it were with a great gulf between, without any direction to get through. For I was not yet effectually and experimentally, taught, that there could be no way prescribed, whereby a natural man could, of his own strength, obtain that which is supernatural, and which the highest angel cannot give.
- (4) Another thing to which I found a great inward opposition, was the sovereignty of God. I could not bear that it should be wholly at God's pleasure to save or damn me, just as he would.

What he has expressed above is yet again some of the common threads among the self-righteous today. When you tell the lost, "Believe on Christ" their first response is, "How do I do that?" Rather than looking to Christ and His finished work, they seek for something that they can do. As Brainerd said, Mr. Stoddard's guide did not, "tell me any thing I could do

that would bring me to Christ" and that is exactly where the self-righteous are looking, they are looking for something they can do! Yet Jesus has declared, "It is finished!" (John 19:30).

He went on to describe the Lord breaking him and showing him that nothing he could do would earn salvation and Christ's favor.

But the truth was, I could see no safety in owning myself in the hands of a sovereign God, and that I could lay no claim to any thing better than damnation.

But after a considerable time spent in such like exercises and distresses, one morning, while I was walking in a solitary place, as usual, *I at once saw that all my contrivances and projects to effect or procure deliverance and salvation for myself, were utterly in vain*; I was brought quite to a stand, as finding myself totally lost. I had thought many times before, that the difficulties in my way were very great; but now I saw, in another and very different light, *that it was for ever impossible for me to do any thing towards helping or delivering myself*. I then thought of blaming myself, that I had not done more, and been more engaged, while I had opportunity -- for it seemed now as if the season of doing was for ever over and gone -- but I instantly saw, that let me have done what I would, it would no more have tended to my helping myself, than what I had done; that I had made all the pleas I ever could have made to all eternity; and that all my pleas were vain. The tumult that had been before in my mind, was now quieted; and I was something eased of that distress, which I felt, while struggling against a sight of myself, and of the divine sovereignty. I had the greatest certainty that my state was for ever miserable, for all that I could do; and wondered that I had never been sensible of it before.

I saw it was self-interest had led me to pray, and that I had never once prayed from any respect to the glory of God. Now I saw there was no necessary connection between my prayers and the bestowment of divine mercy; that they laid not the least obligation upon God to bestow his grace upon me; and that there was no more virtue or goodness in them...

I now saw that something worse had attended *my duties*, than barely a few wanderings, *for the whole was nothing but self-worship, and a horrid abuse of God*.

What Brainerd just said shows forth a repentance, a change of his mind, he saw, "that it was for ever impossible for me to do any thing towards helping or delivering myself." He saw that what had led him to pray was self-interest and that he had "never once prayed from any respect to the glory of God." He saw that his duties as a "whole was nothing but self-worship, and a horrid abuse of God." He saw there was nothing in his hands he could bring, but it was simply to the Cross he must cling. The Lord kept opening his eyes:

...a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God, such as I never had before, nor any thing which had the least resemblance of it. I stood still, wondered, and admired! I knew that I never had seen before any thing comparable to it for excellency and beauty; it was widely different from all the conceptions that ever I

had of God, or things divine. I had no particular apprehension of any one person in the Trinity, either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost; but it appeared to be divine glory. My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable, to see such a God, such a glorious Divine Being; and *I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that he should be God over all for ever and ever*. My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellency, loveliness, greatness, and other perfections of God, that I was even swallowed up in him; at least to that degree, that I had no thought (as I remember) at first about my own salvation, and scarce reflected there was such a creature as myself.

Thus God, I trust, brought me to a *hearty disposition to exalt him, and set him on the throne*, and principally and ultimately to aim at his honor and glory, as King of the universe. I continued in this state of inward joy, peace, and astonishment, till near dark, without any sensible abatement; and then began to think and examine what I had seen; and felt sweetly composed in my mind all the evening following. I felt myself in a new world, and every thing about me appeared with a different aspect from what it was wont to do. At this time, the way of salvation opened to me with such infinite wisdom, suitableness, and excellency, that *I wondered I should ever think of any other way of salvation; was amazed that I had not dropped my own contrivances, and complied with this lovely, blessed, and excellent way before. If I could have been saved by my own duties, or any other way that I had formerly contrived, my whole soul would now have refused it*. I wondered that all the world did not see and comply with this way of salvation, *entirely by the righteousness of Christ*.

But not long after I was again involved in thick darkness, and under great distress; yet not of the same kind with my distress under convictions. I was guilty, afraid, and ashamed to come before God; was exceedingly pressed with a sense of guilt: but it was not long before I felt, I trust, true repentance and joy in God.

Friend, here we see a man who had looked to his inward feelings, his quantity of Bible reading, his prayers and fasting, the level of conviction he felt, but none of it could give him rest. He found rest *"entirely by the righteousness of Christ"* which he received by faith and not by works of the law. He like many today were wondering, *"How do I come to Christ?"* and yet it was only a subtle way of asking, *"What can I do to save myself?"* Yet what a hope there is in Christ. If you are weary and tired of trying to earn your way to God, give up, believe on Christ. Don't look inwardly and ask, *"How do I give up?"*, but look outwardly at Christ who gave His life as a ransom for vile sinners. Drop your own contrivances and comply with, *"This lovely, blessed, and excellent way"*; that way *"entirely by the righteousness of Christ"*. You too can freely receive Jesus Christ's perfect record of obedience to your account and be declared righteous before God by faith alone in Christ's finished work.

After serving as a missionary to the Indians, David Brainerd died at the young age of 29, and in his final days he said, the thought was suggested to him inwardly, *"You are filthy, not fit for heaven." Hereupon instantly appeared the blessed robes of Christ's righteousness which I could not but exult and triumph in.*" There in lies the only hope for the Christian, in the

blessed robes of Christ's perfectly keeping of the standard on our behalf, and dying in our place to pay the penalty in full. If you have not rest, then come by faith and trust in Christ's finished work.