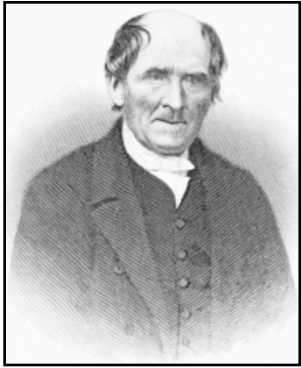


Billy Bray - The Conversion of a Drunkard

Billy Bray, the man who strove to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Billy was a drunken blasphemer yet God pursued him until he longed for God and was released from the burden of his sin. Billy is a perfect example of the words of the Lord: "Strive to enter in at the strait gate" (Lk. 13:24)



Billy Bray was born in the village Twelveheads, Cornwall, a village which consisted of only a few thatched cottages, inhabited by "tanners" and a Methodist Church, where his paternal grandfather worshipped, and which he had helped to build. Billy's father was a pious man who died when his children were very young. They then lived with their grandfather where Billy remained until he was seventeen. Then at Devonshire, far removed from pious example and instruction, he lived a bad life.

In his own words he said: "I became the companion of drunkards, and during that time I was very near hell. His soul was stained with viler sins than now mentioned. His narrow escapes from danger made an impression on his heart at the time, and a deeper impression afterwards. "Once, when I was working underground in the coal mine, and I heard a 'scat' (rent) overhead; I ran out, and, some forty tons fell down where I had been working just a moment before". This did not speak to him about his soul. Moving to another part of Devonshire, he went to live at a beer-shop. "There, with other drunks, I drank all night long. But, I had a sore head and worse than all were horrors of mind that no tongue can tell. I used to dread to go to sleep for fear of waking up in hell; and though I made many promises to the Lord to be better, I was soon as bad or worse than ever. After being absent from my native county seven years, I returned an alcoholic."

His wife had to fetch him home night after night from the beer-shop. "One time I remember I went to get some coal to heat the home; there was a beer-shop on the way, and entering in I stayed till I got drunk. My poor wife was forced to come for me, and wheel home the coal herself. At one time I had good wages for two months successively, and a large portion of the money went in drink. I sinned against light and knowledge; and never got drunk without feeling condemned for it." His conscience tormented him by day, and dreams terrified him by night. Soon the crisis of his life came. Reading John Bunyan's "Visions of Heaven and Hell" was the way God began to awaken him.

The book "Visions of Heaven" first, and then the "Visions of Heaven and Hell" told of two lost souls in hell cursing each other, for being the cause of each other's misery, and that they who love one another on earth will hate one another in hell. One of Billy's very close friends was also much attached to him. They worked together, and went to the pub and got drunk together. The arrow that pierced his soul was the thought, "Shall Mr. Coad and I, who like each other so much, torment each other in hell?" From that time he had a strong desire for a change.

His wife had been converted when young, but had gotten away from the Lord before the marriage. The memory of what she had enjoyed was very sweet, and yet very bitter. She told her husband that "no tongue could tell what they enjoy who serve the Lord." His reply was, "Why don't you start over for then I may begin too." He was ashamed to fall on his knees before his wife, "for the devil had such a hold of him;" but he knew it was his duty to pray for mercy. He went to bed without bending his knees in prayer; but about three o'clock he awoke, and thinking that if he waited until his wife was converted that he might never be saved. Afraid and jumping out of bed, got on his knees for the first time, and cried to God for mercy.

His decision, once formed, was unchangeable, "and I found," he said, "that the more I prayed the more I wanted to pray." The whole morning was spent in supplication. If he had been less resolved and earnest, the day of grace might have passed him by, with blessed opportunity gone forever. At that time on payday, miners would go to the pub to eat, drink, and get drunk. On payday Billy joined his companions as usual. "I was the worst of the lot," was his own expression. On one occasion so wicked was his blasphemy, that even his wicked friends said that his oaths must come from hell, for they smelt of sulphur.

On the first payday that he came home sober for many years, his wife was greatly surprised, and asked: "How is it you have come home so early tonight?" He said: "You will never see me drunk again, by the help of the Lord."

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"That same night I went upstairs, and prayed till we went to bed. The next day I did not go to work but I took the Bible and Wesley's Hymnal, went upstairs, and read and prayed all day. Sometimes I read the Bible, sometimes the Hymn Book, and then I cried to the Lord for mercy. I was glad that I had begun to seek the Lord, for it is said, 'Let the heart of him rejoice that seeketh the Lord.' When Sunday morning came it was very rainy; the Christians had a class-meeting a mile from our house; I went to the place, but because it was wet no one came."

Billy returned home, and alone with God, with the Bible and the Hymn Book as his companions, he spent all that day in reading and praying. He was assailed fiercely by the temptation "that he would never find mercy;" but with the promise, "Seek, and ye shall find," he quenched this fiery dart of the wicked one, and in due time he learned, by blessed experience, that the promise was true.

Monday morning was spent in the same manner. In the afternoon he had to go to the mine, but "all the while I was working I was crying to the Lord for mercy." His sad state moved his fellow workmen to pity; he "was not like Billy Bray," they said. Why? He formerly told lies to make them laugh, and now he was determined to serve the Lord. No relief came, and he went home, "asking for mercy all the way." It was then eleven o'clock at night, but the first thing he did was to go upstairs and fall upon his knees, and ask God to have mercy on him. Everything else was forgotten in the intensity of his desire that the Lord would speak peace to his soul. After a while he went to bed, but not to sleep. All the morning of the next day he spent in crying for mercy, food being almost untasted, and conversation with his "partner" at the mine in the afternoon nearly ceased. That day passed away, and nearly the whole night he spent upon his knees. The enemy hindered him, "but I was glad," he says, "that I had begun to seek the Lord, for I felt I would rather be crying for mercy than living in sin."

On the next day he had "almost laid hold of the blessing," but the time came for him to go to the mine. The devil strongly tempted him while at his work that he would never find mercy; "but I said to him, 'Thou art a liar, devil,' and as soon as I said so, I felt the weight gone from my mind, and I could praise the Lord".

When he got home on former nights he had not cared anything about supper, his anguish of soul being so great, nor did he this night, because a hope had sprung up in his heart and with it a determination to press right into the kingdom of heaven.

Into his room he went and cried to God saying, "Thou hast said, they that ask shall receive, they that seek shall find, and to them that knock the door shall be opened, and I have faith to believe it." In an instant Billy Bray was saved, made a child of the king.

"The Lord made me so happy that I cannot express what I felt. I shouted for joy. I praised God with my whole heart for what He had done for a poor sinner like me; for I could say, the Lord hath pardoned all my sins. I was like a man in a new world. I spent the greater part of my time in praising the Lord. I could say with Isaiah, 'O Lord, I will praise Thee, for though Thou wast angry with me, Thine anger is turned away, and Thou comfortedst me;' or like David, 'The Lord hath brought me up out of a horrible pit of mire and clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings, and hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto my God.' I was a new man altogether. I told everyone I met what the Lord had done for my soul."

He would also say: "I have heard some say how difficult it was to get away from their prior companions in sin, but I sought mine out, and had hard work to find them soon enough to tell them what the Lord had done for me. Some said I was crazy; and others that I would be back with them next payday. But, praise the Lord, it is now more than forty years and they have not got me yet. They said I was a madman, but they meant I was a glad-man, and glory be to God! I have been glad ever since."

An example of Billy's afterlife is seen in a touching way, he would induce his fellow workers to kneel down with him and pray. He says: "Sometimes I have had as many as six to ten men down with me and I have said, 'now if you will listen to me, I will pray with you before we go to work (in the mines), for if I did not pray with you, and if any of us should be killed, I would think it was my fault.'" Some would say, 'you pray, and we will hear you.' When praying I would say: "Lord, if any of us are to be killed today in the mine, let it be me, let not one of these men die, for they are not happy; and if I die today, I shall go to heaven.'" When I would arise from my knees I

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would see tears coming down from some faces, and soon after some of these became praying men too.”

How is such a change brought to pass? It begins by simple faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who died for Billy's sins, and yours too. He arose from the dead and brings life and hope to the drunkard, the sinner, the lost.

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”

1 Timothy 1:15