

## Charles Grandison Finney: The Powerful Life

Adapted and paraphrased from *They Found The Secret*, by V. Raymond Edman

A farmer lad on fire, an Elijah among lawyers, a pungent and powerful preacher of penitence, such was Charles G. Finney. Born in rural Connecticut after the Revolutionary War, reared in a backwoods area of central New York State, he was successively a school teacher and a lawyer before he became a preacher of the gospel.

**Finney's conversion was sudden, startling, dramatic, and dynamic.** Through his youth he had received so little Christian instruction that *at the age of twenty-nine he found himself as ignorant of the gospel as a heathen*. He did not understand Bible terms, and although some believers labored to show him Christian doctrine, he was not convinced. Nevertheless **he believed the Bible to be the Word of God. That confidence led him to read the Scriptures, which gave him concern about the salvation of his own soul.**

Of *his tremendous sense of need, his despair*, and of overwhelming victory, Finney tells his own story far better than anyone else could. "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 as I was very busy in the affairs of the office, I knew that *without great firmness of purpose, I would never effectively 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...

"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. 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 determined to find a private place to pray out loud. 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 there, *something* seemed to confront me with questions. 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 trying 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 on the cross was a *finished work*. And then **I realized 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. 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 worked 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. I had been in the almost daily habit of walking there, 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 towards the woods. I was feeling that *I must be alone*, and away from all human eyes and ears, so that I could pour out my prayer to God... [Finney actually climbed into the middle of a brush pile to be alone and invisible!]

**"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 unable to speak, ...that is, I had nothing to say to God. Or, I could say only a few words, and those without heart.** In attempting to pray, I would seem to hear a rustling in the leaves, and would stop and look up to see if somebody was coming. This I did several times...

**"Finally I found myself verging quickly 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 pray, 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 by God and was past hope.

"The thought was pressing me on 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 you go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. Then shall you seek Me and find Me, when you 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 referring to *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 by me...**

"I walked quietly toward the village; and ***so perfectly quiet was my mind that it seemed as if all nature listened.*** It was on the 10th of October, and a very pleasant day. I had gone into the woods immediately after an early breakfast; and when I returned to the village I found it was lunch time. Yet *I had been wholly unconscious of the time that had passed.* It appeared to me that I had been gone from the village but only a short time...

"I went to my meal, and found I had no appetite to eat. I then went to the office, and found that Squire Wright had gone to lunch. I took down my bass viol, and, as I was accustomed to do, began to play and sing some pieces of sacred music. But **as soon as I began to sing those sacred words, I began to weep.** It seemed as if my heart was all liquid; and my feelings were in such a state that I could not hear my own voice in singing without causing my emotions to overflow. ***I was surprised at this, and tried to suppress my tears, but could not.*** I put up my instrument and stopped singing.

"After lunch we were engaged in removing our books and furniture to another office. We were busy in this, and had but little conversation all the afternoon. ***My mind, however, remained in that profoundly tranquil state.*** There was a great sweetness and tenderness in my thoughts and feelings. Everything appeared to be going right, and nothing seemed to ruffle or disturb me in the least.

**"Just before evening the thought took possession of my mind, that as soon as I was left alone in the new office, I would try to pray again.** I was not going to abandon the subject of religion and give it up, at any rate. Although I no longer had any concern about my soul, still I would continue to pray.

"By evening, we got the books and furniture adjusted; and I made up a good fire in the open fireplace, hoping to spend the evening alone. Just at dark, seeing that everything was adjusted, Squire Wright bade me good-night and went to his home. I had accompanied him to the door; and as I closed the door and turned around, my heart seemed to be liquid within me. All my feelings seemed to rise and flow out; and **the utterance of my heart was, 'I want to pour my whole soul out to God.'** The rising of my soul was so great that I rushed into the room back of the front office, to pray.

"There was no fire, and no light, in that room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, **it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. It did not occur to me then, ...nor did it for some time afterward..., that it was wholly a mental state, ...a vision, as it were.** On the contrary, it seemed to me that I saw Him as I would see any other man. He said nothing, but looked at me in such a manner as to break me right down at his feet. I have always since regarded this as a most remarkable state of mind, for it seemed to me that He Himself actually stood before me. **I fell down at His feet and poured out my soul to Him.** I wept aloud like a child, and made such confessions as I could with a choked utterance. It seemed to me that I bathed His feet with my tears; and yet I had no distinct impression that I touched Him, that I can remember.

**"I must have continued in this state for a good while;** but my mind was too much absorbed with the interview to recollect anything that I said. But I know, as soon as my mind became calm enough to break off from the interview, and I returned to the front office, that I found the fire I had made of large wood was nearly burned out!

As I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, ***I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Spirit.*** ('Baptism' = 'Immersion') Without any expectation of it, ...without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, ...without any recollection that I had ever *heard of* such a thing mentioned by any person in the world, ...**the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul.** I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed, it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect distinctly that it seemed to *fan* me, like immense wings.

**"No words can express the wonderful love that was poured out into my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love.** I do not know, but it seemed that I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, 'I shall *die* if these waves continue to pass over me.' I said, 'Lord, I cannot bear any more'; yet I had no fear of death.

"How long I continued in this state, with this baptism continuing to roll over me and go through me, I do not know. But I know it was late in the evening when a member of my choir -- for I was the leader of the choir -- came into the office to see me. He was a member of the church. He found me in this state of loud weeping, and said to me, 'Mr. Finney, what ails you?' I could make him no answer for some time. He then said, 'Are you in pain?' I gathered myself up as best I could, and replied, 'No, but so happy that I cannot live ....'

**"I soon fell asleep, ...but almost as soon awoke again on account of the great flow of the love of God that was in my heart. I was so filled with love that I could not sleep.** Soon I fell asleep again, and awoke in the same manner. When I awoke, this

desire for sleep would return upon me, and the love that seemed to be in my heart would temporarily abate. However, as soon as I was asleep, it was so warm within me that I would immediately awake again. Thus I continued till, late at night, I obtained some sound repose.

"When I awoke in the morning the sun had risen, and was pouring a clear light into my room. Words cannot express the impression that this sunlight made upon me. **Instantly the baptism that I had received the night before returned upon me in the same manner.** I arose upon my knees in the bed and wept aloud with joy, and remained for some time too much overwhelmed with the baptism of the Spirit to do anything but pour out my soul to God. **It seemed as if this morning's baptism was accompanied with a gentle reproof, and the Spirit seemed to say to me, 'Will you doubt? Will you doubt?'** I cried, '**No! I will not doubt; I cannot doubt!**' At that time, He cleared the subject up so much to my mind that it was in fact impossible for me to doubt that the Spirit of God had taken possession of my soul.

**"In this state I was taught the doctrine of justification by faith, as a present experience.** That doctrine had never before taken any such possession of my mind that I had ever viewed it distinctly as even a fundamental doctrine of the gospel. Indeed, I did not know at all what it meant in the proper sense. But I could now see and understand what was meant by the passage, 'Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 5:1). **I could see that the moment I believed, while up in the woods, all sense of condemnation had entirely dropped out of my mind;** and that from that moment I could not feel a sense of guilt or condemnation by any effort that I could make. **My sense of guilt was gone; my sins were gone! I do not think I felt any more sense of guilt than if I had never sinned."**

By the Spirit of God Finney *came under deep conviction, learned God's plan of salvation, and was born again of the Spirit.* Then, without any knowledge that such an experience was even possible, *was filled to overflowing with that Spirit!*

**Armed by the reality of regeneration, ...and energized by the Spirit..., Finney went forth to witness for his new-found Savior.** *By the Spirit, he had power to witness effectively* wherever he went. On the day after his conversion he spoke with many of his neighbors and friends, and could say, "I believe the Spirit of God made a lasting impression upon every one of them. I cannot remember one whom I spoke with who was not soon after converted." His law office companion, Judge Wright, was the first to come to the Savior. Upon Finney's asking grace at the table in a home, an ungodly young man there present retired to his room, and in the morning came out a believer in Christ. Finney observed, "The word of God had a wonderful power; and I was every day surprised to find that a few words spoken to an individual would stick in his heart like an arrow."

**By the Spirit, Charles Finney became a man of prayer, ... and then, quite spontaneously, a preacher of the gospel.** He began witnessing and preaching in little school houses and country churches. In his *Memoirs* he recalled, "**The Holy Spirit was upon me, and I felt confident that when the time came for action I would know what to preach...** The Spirit of God came upon me with such power, that it was like opening a battery [of artillery] upon them. For more than an hour, and perhaps for an hour and a half, the Word of God came through me to them in a manner that I could see was carrying all before it. ...The Holy Spirit fell upon the congregation in a most remarkable manner. A large number of persons dropped their heads, and some groaned so that they could be heard throughout the house."

**Cataclysmic changes followed the powerful revival labors of Finney from the frontier areas of America to the British Isles.** A convert in Rochester, New York, left a description of Finney's revival ministry in that city, in which more than a hundred thousand came to saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus within one year. He wrote, "The whole community was stirred. Religion was the topic of conversation, in the house, in the shop, in the office, and on the street. ...The only theater in the city was converted into a livery stable; the only circus into a soap and candle factory. Grog shops were closed; the Sabbath was honored; the sanctuaries were thronged with happy worshipers: a new impulse was given to every philanthropic enterprise; the fountains of benevolence were opened, and *men lived to do good.*"

The report continues: "It is worthy of special notice that a large number of leading men of the place were among the converts -- the lawyers, the judges, physicians, merchants, bankers, and master mechanics. These classes were more moved from the very first than any other. Tall oaks were bowed as if by the blast of a hurricane. Skeptics and scoffers were brought in, and a large number of the most promising young men. It is said that no less than forty of them entered the ministry ....

"It is not too much to say that *the whole character of the city was changed by that revival,*" wrote this eyewitness. "Most of the leaders of society being converted, and exerting a controlling influence in social life, in business, and in civil affairs. Religion was *enthroned,* as it has been in few places .... Even the courts and the prisons bore witness to its blessed effects. There was a wonderful falling off in crime. The courts had little to do, and the jail was nearly empty for years afterward."

**Finney's powerful preaching against sin and his stirring presentation of the claims of Christ may have seemed harsh to some, but in reality this man of God was of a tender spirit.** He was a man of tears and great tenderness. In the latter part of his ministry, he experienced deep heart-searching by the Spirit, as described in his *Memoirs*: "The Lord gave my *own* soul a very thorough overhauling, and a fresh baptism of His Spirit. ....I gave myself to a great deal of prayer. After my evening services, I would retire as early as I well could; but rose at four o'clock in the morning, because I could sleep no longer. Immediately I went to the study, and engaged in prayer.... My days were spent, so far as I could get time, in searching the Scriptures. I read nothing all that winter but my Bible; and a great deal of it seemed new to me.... The whole Scripture seemed to be all ablaze with light, ...and not only *light,* but it seemed as if God's Word was instinct with the very *life* of God.... Indeed, the Lord lifted me so much above anything that I had ever experienced before, and taught me so much of the meaning of the Bible, of Christ's relations, and power, and willingness, that I often found myself saying to him, 'I had not known or conceived that any such thing was true'."

**Finney's experience of God was dramatically different from that of most servants of the Savior; and yet it cannot be denied or overlooked.** The Spirit of God, like the wind, does blow where He desires; and He does fill the heart of an evangelist with the fire of God.

### **Observations from Charles Finney's Life:**

Note the "steps" of perception and searching in Finney's life:

Childhood was virtually void of any teaching about religion.

At age 29, knew practically nothing about Jesus, was not a true believer. He had an intellectual knowledge, but not true faith or real experience of God.

Believed Bible to be Word of God, began to read it regularly. This led to a sense of need and a thirst to know God.

Conviction led to a determination to settle things between himself and God; purposed to make this his top priority. Did what he could to secure and set apart time to read, pray and seek God.

Knew he would have to put aside all distractions of time and attention "as sternly and thoroughly as I could", or he would not stay with his intended objective.

Began to sense a need for a prolonged time of undisturbed prayer to seek God.

Didn't want other people to know what he was doing. Embarrassed, prideful, or self-conscious about what others might think of his search for God.

Confronted on road by conviction of "an inward voice", followed by a revelation of "gospel salvation" (i.e., the utter inability of being righteous on his own merits, and the provision made by Christ for him to become righteous before God, freely offered as a gift to be received by trust), Finney determined to accept it, or die in the attempt.

Had difficulty praying. Found that his words would not come. His heart seemed held back and restrained. Felt great discouragement at his inability to do even this.

Saw that pride was the obstacle, and cried out more desperately to God.

Immediately received an inner revelation that God heard him, ...that He hears those who seek Him *when* they ask... Saw the difference between intellectual knowing and trust. Was able to "take God at His word", and experienced a great inner peace. It was settled. He would trust God.

Continued in prayer throughout the day. That evening, he experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that seemed like waves of liquid love. It was so intense, he had to ask God to withdraw. The purpose for this experience seemed to be to remove all remaining doubt.

With a deep, heartfelt confidence in his present acceptance with God, and the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, this "shy" man began to give testimony to his friends and family. Led by the Spirit to become a man of prayer and action, Finney started to preach in small meetings. The power of the Spirit would come on Him as he preached, and people were transformed. He went on to become a powerful preacher to thousands, causing a revival that changed the moral and spiritual climate of the entire NE United States.

### **God Hunt 3: God Rewards Persistence**

"And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened. ...If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him."  
Luke 11:9,10,13 (cf. vss. 1-13)

### **More verses on seeking God:**

Job 8:5

Psalms 9:10

10:4

14:2 (cf. 53:1-4)

22:22-26

24:3-6

27:4-14

63:1-8

77:1-15

105:1-5

119:1-11,38