

CHAPTER FIVE

Introduction to God

Things were as usual in the little red school house. The teacher was going through her daily routine, giving the lesson to each class in its turn. Some of us had finished our own assignments and were listening as she taught the grade four class. Soon we would get a break for morning recess. Then all forty would fly screaming down the school steps, intent on making the most of fifteen minutes of freedom.

Just before the signal for recess the teacher called us to attention: "I have been asked to announce that, beginning Sunday there will be a series of gospel meetings conducted in this school house. The preachers are Miss Frances Layden and Miss Clara Manary. Boys and girls, please tell your parents about this. Everyone is welcome."

MYSTERIOUS BOOK

It sounded interesting but what was a preacher? Up went my hand, "Please, Miss, what is a preacher?"

A little amused the teacher replied, "A preacher is one who speaks from the Bible."

Still in the dark I followed it with a logical question, "What is a Bible?"

With that she drew from her desk a black, mysterious-looking book. On the cover was printed "Holy

Bible" in letters of gold. There followed a few words of explanation on what the Bible was. We all seemed quite satisfied and in a few minutes were playing in the school yard, completely unaware of the affect the coming meeting would have on us.

FIRST GOSPEL SERVICE

At the opening service on Sunday night I was present. Helen sat beside me in the same double desk we used in the daytime. The two lady preachers had walked up and down the roads calling on family after family inviting them to attend. The school house was crowded to capacity.

I will never forget that first gospel meeting. Never! What I heard there will stay with me through all eternity. The preacher appointed someone to give out the hymn books. These we regarded with curiosity. Then we began to sing,

Life at best is very brief,
Like the falling of a leaf,
Like the binding of a sheaf.
Be in time!

And we sang,

We are fading too like the flowers
That but yesterday were in their bloom.
Oh how many pass with the hours,
O'er our path falls the shadow of the tomb.

There was something touching about the plaintive melodies. The words were solemnizing. It was impossible to escape the logic of them. Had I not seen

Aunt Sina lying in the coffin? She had faded like the flowers and had been cut down like the grass.

GREATEST LOVE STORY

Out came the mysterious book—the Bible. The preacher read a few lines from it and then told the most wonderful story that I have ever heard. Spell-bound I drank in every word.

It was all about a Man who was so wonderful that even His enemies could find no fault in Him. He took the little children in His arms and blessed them. He healed the blind and made the lame to walk. He loved the unlovely Mary Magdalene, the woman of bad reputation. He cared for people that no one else loved.

Thirteen years old and mature beyond my years, I was for the first time hearing of the marvelous Man of Galilee. The meeting was quiet, the singing poor (nobody knew the hymns) but the preaching moved me deeply.

Christ was everything that one could imagine and much more. The preacher pictured His sufferings in Gethsemane and in the judgment hall before Pilate. Dramatically we walked the way of sorrow with Him, feeling His anguish, wanting to share the load of the heavy cross. When the procession reached the summit of Calvary's Hill, I felt that some kind of deliverance would come. I was sure that some man of authority would arrive at the last moment and free the innocent one.

To my surprise and horror His persecutors threw Him rudely to the ground, nailed Him to a cross and

lifted Him up to die. Every sense of decency and justice within me was in revolt against this unspeakable crime.

Then the preacher looked down at me, right into my eyes and asked, "Do you know why He died?" Breathlessly I waited for the answer. She continued, "He didn't have to die. He was the Son of God and could have pronounced judgment on all His enemies. At the crucifixion all heaven stood alert awaiting His command. He died because He loved you. 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life'."

HE LOVED ME?

Could it be that He loved me? Why nobody had ever loved me. I was the little Gerard girl who would never come to any good, the black sheep who was always leading the other little lambs astray. In thirteen years I had lived in nine different households: sometimes with relatives in the United States; sometimes with neighbors and sometimes at home. In none of these places had I really belonged. Always I was the girl "just taken in" either for pity or profit. Now the preacher was telling me that this man loved me enough to die for me!

Cautiously I pulled myself together to face the facts. It was possible that this woman was just telling a story to serve some purpose of her own. I could not take my eyes from her. "Preacher," thought I, "you wouldn't be lying would you? You wouldn't stand up there looking so pretty and tell a beautiful

story like that if it were not true?" If that was what she was doing it was the meanest thing I could think of.

REJECTION UNTHINKABLE

I wanted the story to be true. I wanted Jesus Christ to be real. If what she said was true, if God really did love me so much that He gave His Son to die for me, I would give myself to Him and follow Him all the days of my life. The thought of rejecting Christ never occurred to me. I only worried that He might not want me. If the preacher had asked me that night to go to the front and take a public stand on the side of Christ I would have done it. That is one of the beauties of hearing the gospel in early youth. Tenderness of heart and the lack of damaging prejudices make it easier to say "Yes," to Christ.

LONGING FOR PURITY AND PARDON

My own unworthiness overwhelmed me. My adoption was a failure. I did not know anything about my natural parents and feared I had been illegitimate. What little information I had gleaned on that subject had been from questionable sources and filled me with a sense of shame. But worst of all was the burden of my own sin that had nailed Christ to the cross. I longed for the purity and pardon that the preacher said would come when I confessed my guilt.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful
and just to forgive us our sins, and to
cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

CONVICTION

When the meeting was over Helen and I heaved a sign of relief as we got out into the fresh air. She said, "I am no sissy but do you know if they had kept on with the meeting, I would have been crying." Relieved to find that she too had been stirred I said, "I'm no sissy either but I could have cried too. I felt funny inside when she told that story." God by His Spirit had convicted both of us of righteousness, temperance and judgment.

I had the privilege of attending only a few of the gospel meetings. One night I walked alone through the woods to the meeting. In the darkness blobs of phosphorous glowed on the wooded trail. What usually terrified me now seemed insignificant. The meetings had become very important to me.

DECISION ALREADY MADE

When the series of meetings was drawing to a close the preachers made plans "to test" the meeting. At the Sunday afternoon service someone whispered to me that I should make up my mind whether or not I wanted to follow Christ. We would be asked to make known our decision on the last hymn. My decision was already made.

At a shivaree the night before, a few of us gathered in a corner and discussed the gospel meetings. The neighbors had come and deposited their babies in the bedroom. They were now expressing their good wishes to the newly-weds by dancing 'til the rafters trembled. Most of the men had liquor on their breath and the house-warming was turning into a rough party.

Sitting on a large wooden barrel in the corner with a few others around me I voiced my disapproval of the celebration. To my own surprise I spoke out loudly in favor of the gospel meetings. "When I grow up," I said, "I am going to give my life to God like the preacher ladies have done." There were comments favorable and unfavorable but I stood my ground. All I had thought of for days were the gospel meetings and the possibility of a new life following Christ.

"If you desire to confess Christ as your personal Saviour, please signify your decision by standing during the singing of this hymn." said the preacher. Not knowing what to expect but determined to be obedient, I stood up. "God, if there is a God, I'm giving my life to you. Please, wash away my sins and make me clean as the snow," I prayed silently. To my surprise a great peace swept over me. My knees felt weak and the tears began to flow down my cheeks. Something good had happened inside of me. The preacher put her arms around me and commended me for my decision.

BLACK LEGION

The news that I had publicly confessed Christ as my Saviour reached home before I did. When I arrived it was supper time.

"We hear you joined the black legion," said one of my brothers with a smile.

Shyly I nodded, "Yes."

Then he said, "All your fun is over now. That is worse than becoming a nun."

I had no idea what he meant by, "All your fun is over." All I knew was that I felt clean and strong.

They might laugh and refer to the preachers with their black stockings and dark clothes as the black legion but I admired and respected them. To be just a little like them when I grew up seemed an ambitious goal.

During the next few weeks I felt God's miracle-working power. My pals at school could see the difference. The teen-agers of our school were fast developing into a wild crowd. On our way home from school most of us secretly smoked cigarettes. If we couldn't get tailor-mades we rolled our own or made some out of maple leaves. We tried everything that came into our heads, even to smoking cigars.

Beside our daring urges to meddle with the forbidden we carried on a kind of gang rule on the school ground. Anyone who tattled to his teacher or parents was punished by the rest. The older girls and boys imagined themselves to be madly in love and from these flash romances grew jealousies and rivalries.

OLD THINGS PASSED AWAY

To this day I am thrilled to remember the miraculous power of God and its affect, following my decision to live for Christ. Nobody could have been more destitute of Christian teaching or more ignorant of what is meant to be a Christian. Yet God put Christianity in my heart. My whole course of thought and conduct was changed. When I asked my preacher how I could know for sure that I was a Christian, she said, "All you have to do is look at your own life and interests. The scripture has been fulfilled in you

'Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new'."

The change was evident in the ordinary activities of my life. Blood and thunder murder stories, ranch romances and detective stories had been my spare-time reading since I learned to read. Most Mothers see to it that their girls read the right books: perhaps Joan Fielding at Snow Camp or Black Beauty. Nobody cared what I read. The boys at our house used to buy cheap novels, second-hand. Hungry to read I eagerly devoured the stories and often read the same one several times. Right after my conversion my brother brought a large stack of magazines home and, anticipating my usual pleasure said, "These are for you." Something inside of me revolted. I had to tell him that I doubted I would ever read that kind of book again. Puzzled he asked, "Did somebody tell you not to read these?"

"No," I answered, "I just don't think I will ever be reading them again."

One Sunday night my foster Father and brother decided to go to the theatre. Because the theatre was not open on Sunday in Canada we used to drive to the international border and cross over to Sumas in the State of Washington. Usually I jumped with glee at the thought of going to a show. But the new Bernice did not want to go. With difficulty I tried to explain how I felt. This time angrily they asked, "Did those preachers tell you not to go to the show?"

"No, they didn't say one word about it."

Nobody went to the show that night. I retired to

my room and by the light of the coal oil lamp read the New Testament the preacher had given me.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

Would I be able to continue with what I had begun? Could this new life possibly flourish in so alien an environment? My adoption was a failure. There was no promise for the future in my present situation. They took my hymn book and New Testament away and laughingly declared that a thirteen-year-old could not possibly know anything about religion.

In desperation I cried out to God. My preacher friend would soon be leaving the district and then who would help me? It occurred to me to run away. Common sense told me they would find me somehow and bring me back. Then there would be my foster Father's rage to face. Troubled and fearful of the future I confided in my preacher. It was right after that God wrought a miracle on my behalf.