

Extract from a Letter

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Souls, dear -, are enabled to make so short a journey in these days. It used to be an age to pass from death unto life, but now 'tis a journey accomplished in haste. And really this is more according to the New Testament model. Zaccheus and the thief, the Samaritan and Peter and Matthew, took but little time to travel that road. But it is comforting, however, to see other cases, souls finding their way more gradually step by step. The spirit of Nathaniel may have been under the shade of the fig-tree for years; we cannot say. Lydia may have been in "the place where prayer was wont to be made" for years; we cannot say. Cornelius may have had his feasts and his religious services and his legal fears about his soul and his gracious almsgiving for years; we cannot say. But we do see the slow-heartedness and creeping progress of Nicodemus. And yet he has surely reached Jesus at the end, and all the time was on the road, as they did who took a short cut as it were across the fields.

There was conviction and uneasiness in his soul I believe when he first came to the Lord. It was not a *commanding* affection I grant you. Had it been so it would have shaped his approach to Jesus very differently from what we find it was. And he left Him much perhaps as he came, only as one who had heard things to startle him, and give him such musings that either he must entertain them or have no more to say to Jesus. (John 3.) And I believe he did entertain them. He continued uneasy, and did not stifle conviction, so that on the next occasion he pleads for righteousness, and is so far an advocate of the Lord. (John 7.)

But this is slow work, and this slowness is not to his honour. The fear of man was still over him. The affections that drew him to the Lord were not commanding yet. Had they been so, he would not have been standing for Him in the council of enemies, but he would have joined himself with His disciples. Indeed we never find him in their company; a bad sign. Cords and bands must be weak that do not draw that way. Still the thing is real with him, and he who once stole by night to the Lord, now stands up for His rights, as one accused, in the face of his enemies.

There is, however, a difference between an *advocate* and a *disciple* of Christianity. I may eloquently plead for truth, or learnedly write for it, and yet be personally a stranger to it. Nicodemus had not yet learned Christ as sinners learn a Saviour. But does he not come to this at last? He reaches the cross. Surely a good symptom. Surely the best place he could be in. I can scarcely say when I see him there, and the very apostles themselves fled and gone, that the last shall be first. I know not that I can say that — that now the timid Joseph, and the slow-hearted Nicodemus, are before and beyond the earnest Peter and the loving John. I know not, again I say, that I can say that. But Joseph and Nicodemus are in the best place on the face of the whole earth at that moment. There was not a single act that could have been performed by faith, more in season with that moment, than the taking down the body from the cross. It was owning the crucified One in the face of the world, and fulfilling, though they may not have known it, the words of the prophet, "With the rich in His death."

The place too is the place where the sinner properly first meets his Saviour. He looks to Him whom his sins had pierced. He is now a sinner looking to be saved, and not a pupil looking to be taught, as at first, and he has new thoughts of Jesus now. He could not now have said, "We know thou art a Teacher come from God," true as that is; he must reach Him as a Saviour ere he can learn of Him as a Teacher.

Does he not make the journey from darkness to light, from death unto life? Surely he does, slow-paced traveller as he was. Ah! there is comfort in tracking the path of such an one amid the brilliant footprints of the Samaritan, and of the adulteress, of Andrew and Philip, and the blind beggar. J. G. B.