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Jesse S. Engle

FINDING REALITY IN GOD

I do not know that there is any particular value in the way in which I have found reality in God, but this morning I am going to share with you the process. It may help some one who is now trying to find God, and it may enable some of you to tell me how to find Him better. It certainly is not offered as a necessary or even best way.

In connection with a course in the University in Religious Education I was required to write a religious autobiography and, having written it, then destroy it without turning it in to the professor, but indicate to him whatever of value there had been to me in writing it.

That has been ten years ago, but the main points of the experience may be briefly shared with you.

I think my first definite religious experience came when I was about nine years old. Following the death of a baby sister there was one week during which my father read from the New Testament before we went to bed. I do not have any recollection as to what was read, but I recall the feeling of unusualness about it, and my unexpressed wish that it would be continued. I had gone to Sunday School one summer when I was six years old, but recall nothing of that except that one Sunday morning the teacher put his feet up on the back of the seat in front of him before Sunday School began. I remember feeling that such an action was out of place.

When I was eleven years old I began going to Sunday School and church regularly, and have missed very few Sundays at church since then. When thirteen years old, along with seven or eight schoolmates about the same age, I went out to the altar in a revival meeting for nine consecutive nights. But nine sessions on our knees from one to two hours an evening failed to bring salvation to any one of us. None of us "got through".

I recall distinctly a good old man telling me to Believe, but not telling me what to believe. And I recall one night when a good woman on one side kept telling me to pay no attention to anything that any person said to me, but look to God only; while at the same time an equally good woman on the other side kept asking me questions. Following the advice of the first sister, I resolutely refused to answer any questions, and so did not get much help.

We were all taken into church membership as "seekers" and the members promised to try to lead us into the full light. Nobody said anything to me about religion until the next revival meeting. That time I waited until nearly the close of the meeting without going forward again. Then several girls who had been along the winter before went out and were converted. One of them

was my older sister, and she told me that her life was different. Another was a girl in whom I was secretly very much interested. She was extremely bashful, but after she "got religion" she was not afraid to get up in church and talk, and she was not afraid to talk about it at school. Such a striking change in her convinced me there was really something in it.

The last day of the meetings came, and I spent several hours out at the barn praying that I might get religion. That night I walked two miles through blackness so black I could not keep in the road but found myself several times in the ditch, and arrived at church with very muddy shoes. Those muddy shoes almost kept me from responding to the invitation to go to the altar, but I went because I desperately wanted to be converted. Another boy my age came later. They continued the meetings three additional nights for our sakes but neither of us got anywhere. At last, about half past ten at night, the patient pastor said he could see nothing more to do for us but to take us into full membership as we were. In the presence of a few faithful ones we took the vows of church membership.

Several years passed, during which my belief in God was kept alive by hearing the testimonies of a few old men and women and two young women. A series of sermons on the life of Jesus did much to keep my mind toward God. I began to feel a personal affection for Him.

I went regularly to church and Sunday School, said my prayers every night on going to bed even when with boys who did not do that. But I did not consider that I was a Christian, nor did I have the power I wanted over myself. Many a night I prayed for hours.

During those years I began to teach school. Every evening after the children had gone home I spent a half-hour more praying about the individual boys and girls that I might know how best to handle their problems. I always read one or more chapters from the Bible every evening. One night as I was reading through the Gospel of John I came to the seventeenth chapter. As I read that alone in my room, it seemed to me that I could almost hear Jesus praying for his disciples, and I came there to have a real love for Jesus as a person. From that time till now I have seldom read the seventeenth chapter of John in public. But I did not consider myself a Christian. I did not kneel in prayer at church, which definitely put me in the non-professing class.

During these years my older sister twice wrote to me about becoming a Christian. One evening after school I received a letter from her asking me to come to a revival meeting going on in the church which she attended. It was the biggest church in the county-seat town. And the town was twenty miles away, and I was five miles from the railway station.

What happened that night may be told in the report of the meeting as it appeared in the daily paper next day: the report

being sent in by the evangelist each morning. I quote from memory one paragraph.

"Contrary to usual custom Evangelist Cornell last night after preaching a powerful dramatic sermon on "The Pale Horse and His Rider", which held the great congregation spell-bound, announced that the invitation would be extended without having the congregation stand or sing, bow their heads, or even close their eyes. There were several moments of intense silence when no one moved. Then a young man arose from the last seat in the auditorium and made his way to the altar. Before long twenty-five more had come."

I was that young man and I had paid little attention to the powerful, dramatic sermon, which repelled me when I did listen to it. I was there because a girl had written to her brother urging him to be foolish enough to travel twenty miles to go to an altar. I was not there many minutes until I felt an undefinable surging of newness of life. At last I had found God. And I was amazed at the ease with which it was finally done, and wondered how I could have been so stupid as to struggle for six years to find Him.

One week later I came again to this church and heard the evangelist talk on accepting the whole will of God, giving up all that is good as well as what is evil. That was something new to me. But if there was more in religion that I had I wanted it. I went through a terrific struggle that evening. Whether an hour or half-hour I do not know. One by one the good things I hoped to have in my life were faced in deadly earnest. One by one I agreed to give them up if God should require it. Not evil things, but good things that might interfere with His plan for my life. It narrowed down to three things that I valued above all else. And then two, and finally one. When at last I said that if my life's work should require me to give up that, I would do it something happened. An hour or two later I went back to my room at the hotel. A fellow-teacher was sharing the room with me. When I went in he took one look, and said, "And now what's happened to you?" I had again found God through Christ, not only as Savior but as Lord and Master.

Since then I have found Him most real by doing what I would not have done apart from believing it His will: "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God." (John 7:17)