

Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret

by Howard and Geraldine Taylor

Edited and Revised by Gregg Lewis

Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret
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1

*“I poured out my soul before God.
Again and again confessing my grateful love
to Him who had done everything for me . . .
I besought Him to give me
some work to do for Him as an outlet
for love and gratitude.”*

1832 - 1850

James Hudson Taylor never appeared to be an exceptional child. Though his father had the education required to be a pharmacist, Hudson's parents decided not to send him to school until he was eleven. While he was a sickly child, missing at least one day of school almost every week because of illness, he quickly learned to read and showed a proficiency in math. But at the age of thirteen, after just two years of formal schooling, Hudson gave it up to help in his father's shop in the town of Barnsley, in Yorkshire, England.

Born in 1832 to devoutly religious parents, Hudson heard early and often the gospel story of Jesus, the only Son of God, who came to earth and died so that people's sins could be forgiven. And with a childlike faith, the young boy accepted what his parents taught him simply because they believed it.

As a teenager, however, Hudson began to question the reality of the Bible. And when, at the age of fifteen, he took a junior clerk position in a local bank and became exposed for the first time to the influence and opinions of older and more skeptical friends, Hudson abandoned the Christian faith and the teaching of his family.

Even after eye strain forced him to give up accounting and he again began working with his father, his doubts about Christianity continued. Though he wasn't outwardly

rebellious, his parents recognized his spiritual struggle and worried about their son. Then, at age seventeen, something happened. Hudson later recorded the events of that day:

“On a day I can never forget . . . my dear mother being absent from home [visiting relatives some distance away], I had a holiday, and in the afternoon looked through my father’s library to find some book with which to while away the unoccupied hours. Nothing attracting me, I turned over a basket of pamphlets and selected from amongst them a Gospel tract that looked interesting, saying to myself, ‘There will be a story at the commencement and a sermon or moral at the close. I will take the former and leave the latter for those who like it.’

“I sat down to read the book in an utterly unconcerned state of mind, believing indeed at the time that if there were any salvation it was not for me, and with distinct intention to put away the tract as soon as it should seem prosy. I may say that it was not uncommon in those days to call conversion ‘becoming serious’; and judging by the faces of some of its professors it appeared to be a very serious matter indeed! Would it not be well if the people of God had always tell-tale faces, evincing the blessing and gladness of salvation so clearly that unconverted people might have to call conversion ‘becoming joyful’ instead of ‘becoming serious’?

“Little did I know at the time what was going on in the heart of my dear mother, seventy or eighty miles away. She rose from the dinner-table that afternoon with an intense yearning for the conversion of her boy; and feeling that, absent from home and having more leisure than she could otherwise secure, a special opportunity was afforded her of pleading with God on my behalf. She went to her room and turned the key in the door, resolved not to leave

the spot until her prayers were answered. Hour after hour that dear mother pleaded, until at length she could pray no longer, but was constrained to praise God for that which His Spirit taught her had already been accomplished, the conversion of her only son.

“I in the meantime had been led in the way I have mentioned to take up this little tract, and while reading it was struck with the phrase, ‘The finished work of Christ.’ Why did the author use this expression?

“Immediately the words ‘It is finished’ suggested themselves to my mind.

“ ‘What was finished?’

“And I at once replied, ‘A full and perfect atonement . . . for sin. The debt was paid for our sins, and not ours only but also the sins of the whole world.’

“Then came the further thought, ‘If the whole work was finished and the whole debt paid, what is there left for me to do?’

“And with this dawned the joyful conviction, as light was flashed into my soul by the Holy Spirit, that there was nothing in the world to be done but to fall down on one’s knees and accept this Saviour and His Salvation . . .

“When Mother returned a fortnight later I was first to meet her at the door and to tell her I had such glad news to give. I can almost feel that dear Mother’s arms round my neck as she pressed me to her heart and said,

“ ‘I know, my boy. I have been rejoicing for a fortnight in the glad tidings you have to tell’ . . . and went on to tell the incident mentioned above. You will agree with me that it would be strange indeed if I were not a believer in the power of prayer.

“Nor was this all. Some time later, I picked up a pocket-book exactly like my own, and thinking it was

mine, opened it. The lines that caught my eye were an entry in the little diary belonging to my sister [who was four years younger], to the effect that she would give herself daily to prayer until God should answer in the conversion of her brother. One month later the Lord was pleased to turn me from darkness to light.

“Brought up in such a circle and saved under such circumstances, it was perhaps natural that from the commencement of my Christian life I was led to feel that the promises were very real, and that prayer was a sober matter of fact transacting business with God, whether on one’s own behalf or on the behalf of those for whom one sought his blessing.”

Without ever becoming the kind of “serious” Christian he thought so unappealing, Hudson tried never to take his faith lightly. Like most young Christians, he would sometimes fall to temptation and feel discouraged by his continuing weakness. But he never let himself feel satisfied with an up and down spiritual life. He longed for a better, more complete relationship with God, and one particular afternoon he began to pray about that longing:

“Well do I remember how in the gladness of my heart I poured out my soul before God. Again and again confessing my grateful love to Him who had done everything for me, who had saved me when I had given up all hope and even desire for salvation, I besought Him to give me some work to do for Him as an outlet for love and gratitude . . .

“Well do I remember as I put myself, my life, my friends, my all upon the altar, the deep solemnity that came over my soul with the assurance that my offering was accepted. The presence of God became unutterably real and blessed, and I remember . . . stretching myself on the

ground and lying there before Him with unspeakable awe and unspeakable joy. For what service I was accepted I knew not, but a deep consciousness that I was not my own took possession of me which has never since been effaced.”

Though he had committed his entire life to God, Hudson continued to struggle with times of failure and discouragement. And it was in one such experience of defeat and discouragement that he called out to God for help. He so wanted to live a life pleasing to God in every way that he felt he would go anywhere, do anything, suffer however the Lord asked if only God would give him the assurance of his clear direction.

“Never shall I forget [he wrote long after] the feeling that came over me then. Words could not describe it. I felt I was in the presence of God, entering into a covenant with the Almighty. I felt as though I wished to withdraw my promise but could not. Something seemed to say, ‘Your prayer is answered; your conditions are accepted.’ And from that time the conviction has never left me that I was called to China.”

Hudson Taylor’s immediate response to what he clearly felt was God’s calling for him was simple and practical. From that day he began to prepare for a life that would call for physical endurance. He took more exercise in the open air, exchanged his feather bed for a hard mattress and carefully watched his diet. Instead of going to church twice on Sunday, he gave up the evening to visit in the poorest parts of town, distributing tracts and holding cottage meetings. In crowded lodging house kitchens he became a welcome figure, and even on the race course his bright face and kindly words opened the way for him to share his faith. The more he talked about God to others, the more he realized he needed to know. So he began devoting

even more time to prayer and personal Bible study.

And of course, if he planned to go to China, he needed to learn Chinese. But a rare book of Chinese grammar would have cost him more than twenty dollars and a Chinese-English dictionary at least seventy-five dollars. He could afford neither. So he bought a copy of the gospel of Luke in Chinese. By patiently comparing brief verses with their equivalent in English, he uncovered the meanings of more than six hundred characters. These he learned and made into a dictionary of his own.

“I have begun to get up at five in the morning [he wrote to his sister at school] and find it necessary to go to bed early. I must study if I am to go to China. I am fully decided to go, and am making every preparation I can. I intended to rub up my Latin, to learn Greek and the rudiments of Hebrew, and get as much general information as possible. I need your prayers.”

Several years working alongside his father in preparing prescriptions had given Hudson an interest in medicine. So when he heard that a physician in the seaside city of Hull needed an assistant, Hudson applied for the job and was accepted. Though this meant he had to move away from home, he was able to move in for a time with an aunt who lived in Hull and enjoy all the benefits of home.

Hudson’s employer, Dr. Hardy, paid him a salary adequate for covering his personal expenses. The young assistant gave ten percent of his income to the work of God and devoted his own time on Sunday evenings to evangelistic work in the poorest part of town. And the more exposed he became to the needs of the poor he met, the more seriously he began to think about his own comfortable lifestyle.

If he spent less on himself, would he find even greater

joy in being able to give more to others? Hudson decided to live out an experiment to try to answer that question.

On the outskirts of town, beyond some vacant lots, sat a double row of cottages bordering a narrow canal in a neighborhood referred to as “Drainside.” The canal was really just a deep ditch into which the people of Drainside tossed their rubbish and sewage to be carried away with the tide.

The cottages, like peas in a pod, followed the winding drain for a half mile. Each identical house had one door and two windows. And it was for a rented room in one of these small shacks that Hudson Taylor left his aunt’s pleasant home.

Mrs. Finch, Hudson’s new landlady, was a true Christian and delighted to have “the young doctor” under her roof. She did her best to make the chamber clean and comfortable, polishing the fireplace opposite the window and making up the bed in the corner farthest from the door. A plain wooden table and a chair or two completed the appointments.

The room was only twelve feet square and was situated on the first floor of the bungalow, opening right out into the family’s kitchen. From Hudson’s lone window he could look across the drain to a pub whose lights were useful on dark nights shining across the mud and water of the drain.

In addition to his rather dreary surroundings, Hudson’s move to Drainside required him to provide his own meals. This meant that he bought his meager supplies as he returned from surgery and rarely sat down to a proper supper. His walks were solitary, his evenings spent alone, and Sundays brought long hours of work, either in his new neighborhood or among the crowds who frequented the

Humber Dock.

“Having now the twofold object in view [he recalled] of accustoming myself to endure hardness, and of economising in order to help those among whom I was labouring in the Gospel, I soon found that I could live upon very much less than I had previously thought possible. Butter, milk, and other luxuries I ceased to use, and found that by living mainly on oatmeal and rice, with occasional variations, a very small sum was sufficient for my needs. In this way I had more than two-thirds of my income available for other purposes, and my experience was that the less I spent on myself and the more I gave to others, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become.”

It was during this time at Drainside that Hudson gained a deeper, more painful understanding of the sacrifice that would be required to go to China. For it had been almost two years since he'd made the acquaintance of a talented and beautiful young music teacher from his sister Amelia's school. And Hudson had fallen in love.

Though the girl was a Christian, she didn't feel at all called to the mission field. On more than one occasion when they were talking about his plans, she asked Hudson if he couldn't serve God just as well at home as in China. But Hudson was sure of God's call. He was also deeply in love. And since she had never said she wouldn't be willing to go with him, he hoped and prayed that she would soon feel the same call he did.

But just weeks after he moved to Drainside, he got the final, heartbreaking word. She would not go to China. Hudson confided in a letter to his sister Amelia:

“For some days I was as wretched as a heart could wish. It seemed as if I had no power in prayer nor relish for it; and instead of throwing my care on Him, I kept it all to

myself until I could endure it no longer.”

Temptation gripped him, asking, “Why should you go to China, after all? Why toil and suffer all your life for an ideal of duty? Give it up now, while you can yet win her. Earn a proper living like everybody else, and serve the Lord at home. For you can win her yet.”

Love pleaded hard. Then, as he told his sister:

“In the afternoon as I was sitting alone in the Surgery I began to reflect on the love of God; His goodness and my return; the number of blessings He has granted me; and how small my trials are compared with those some are called to endure. He thoroughly softened and humbled me. His love melted my icy, frost-bound soul, and sincerely did I pray for pardon for my ungrateful conduct . . . and had a wonderful manifestation of the love of God.

“Yes, He has humbled me and shown me what I am, revealing Himself as a present, a very present help in time of trouble. And though He does not deprive me of feeling in my trial, He enables me to sing, ‘Yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation . . .’

“Now I am happy in my Saviour’s love. I can thank Him for all, even the most painful experiences of the past, and trust Him without fear for all that is to come.”