

Joseph Tremblay

*A Priest, but a Stranger to God*

God is able to save anyone, anytime, anywhere. Wherever the person in question be found, whatever the profession in which he be engaged, whatever his race, God is still able in our day to save whosoever will repent of his sins and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. My own experience is an example of this.

It all began in 1964, in Chile, while I was a missionary in the Congregation of the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate and ended in Canada in 1966. What happened between these two dates? What happened is the salvation of my soul. I had wanted to give myself to Him. I had really thought to have already done so by the fact of my membership in the religion into which I was born. But one day God opened my eyes, giving me to understand my sin and His way of salvation. Here is how it happened.

I was born in Quebec, Canada, in 1924. From childhood my parents inculcated in me a great respect for God. I desired intensely to serve Him to the best of my ability and to consecrate myself totally to Him in order to please Him, according to the words of the Apostle Paul: *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”* (Romans 12:1) It was the desire to please Him that motivated my decision to take the Holy Orders of the Roman Catholic Church.

### **A Missionary to Bolivia**

After several years of study, I was ordained a priest in Rome, Italy. One year later I was sent as a missionary to Bolivia and Chile, where I served for more than 13 years. I liked the life very much and tried to discharge my responsibilities as best I could. I enjoyed the friendship of all my co-workers, and even if they looked with a certain irony upon my pronounced taste for the study of the Bible, their invitations to share with them the results of my studies evidenced their approval. When they called me “Joe the Bible,” I knew that in spite of the sarcasm expression, they envied me. My parishioners also appreciated the ministry of the Word of God, so much so that they organized a club for home Bible studies. I was compelled to give myself to earnest study of the Bible, as much to prepare myself for the improvised home meetings as to prepare my Sunday sermons.

### **Serious Bible Study**

The study of the Bible, which until that time had been just a hobby, quickly became a professional obligation. I became aware of the clarity with which certain truths were taught, and, on the other hand, I discovered that nothing at all was written about many dogmas that I had studied. My Bible study revealed that I did not know the Bible. I suggested to my superiors that I might like to go for further studies in the Bible when my turn for vacation arrived. In the meantime, the Jesuits at Antofagasta invited me to teach the Bible at the Normal School of the University, which they directed. I do not know how they learned of my interest in the Bible. Notwithstanding my lack of preparation, I accepted the invitation, knowing that this new responsibility would necessitate even more serious study of the Word of God.

### **The Gospel Via Radio**

How many hours, days, and nights were consecrated to the preparation of my classes, my meetings, and my sermons. To maintain a good morale during my readings and studies, I had the habit of listening to music. I had been given a little transistor radio on which I could listen to beautiful background music without the bother of changing records. It was thus that one day I became aware that it was religious songs and hymns that were coming through to me on the little radio. I heard the word "Jesus" from time to time while I was reading the Bible or commentaries.

The atmosphere was very propitious. But the hymns didn't last long. A short Bible reading followed them. The last verse that was read caught my attention: "*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*" (II Corinthians 5:21). The sermon that followed was based on this verse. At first I was tempted to change the station, because it was too distracting to listen to someone speaking while trying to study. In addition, I thought to myself: What could this ministry add to me, after all, me with all my degrees? I could teach him a thing or two. After a moment's hesitation I decided to listen to what he had to say...and, truly, I learned some of the most wonderful things concerning the Person of Jesus Christ. I was even filled with shame, knowing without a doubt that I could not have done as well as the one who had preached.

It had seemed to me that it was Jesus Himself who had been speaking to me, who was there before me. And how little I knew Him, this Jesus, who, nevertheless, was the subject of my thoughts, and of my studies. I felt that He was far from me. It was the first time that such a feeling concerning Jesus Christ had ever presented itself to me. He seemed to be a stranger. It was as if all of my being were but emptiness, around which I had erected a structure of principles and theological dogmas, very beautiful, well-constructed, well-illustrated, but which had not touched my soul, which had not changed my being. I felt as if there were a great emptiness in me. And in spite of the fact that I continued to study and to gorge myself with reading, praying, and meditating, this emptiness became even greater with each day that passed.

### **I Learned Salvation by Grace**

I went on listening to this same radio station, tuning in to every program that I could. I learned that the station was in Quito. It was HCJB. I learned also that it was a radio station consecrated exclusively to the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world. Sometimes I was very much

touched by all that I heard, and on such occasions I wrote directly to the station to thank them and to ask for information.

What struck me the most in all that I heard was the insistence with which one spoke of salvation by grace: that all the credit for the salvation of man was given, not to the one who was saved, but to the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Savior; that man could boast of nothing, that his works were but filthy rags, that eternal life could be received within the heart only as a free gift, that it was not a reward in exchange for merits that had been acquired but was an unmerited gift given by God to whosoever repents of his sins and receives Jesus Christ into his heart and life as personal Savior. All of this was new to me. It was contrary to the theology I had been taught: that heaven and eternal life are gained by means of one's merit, faithfulness, charity, and sacrifices. And this is what I had been working at for so many years. But what was the result of my efforts?

As I considered this question I said to myself, "I'm not any further ahead. If I commit a mortal sin, I'll go to hell if I die in that state. My theology has taught me that salvation is by works and sacrifices. I discover in the Bible a free salvation. My theology gives me no assurance of salvation; the Bible offers me that assurance. I'm confused. Perhaps I should stop listening to those Evangelical programs."

My inner battle was taking on alarming proportions. I suffered in my body and in my heart, with headaches, insomnia, and fear of hell. I had no desire to celebrate Mass or listen to confessions. My soul had greater need of pardon and consolation than all the other souls with which I was in contact. I avoided everybody.

But God continued to speak to me in the solitude of my anguished heart. So many questions came up in my spirit; so many misgivings smoldered in my heart. The Word of God came to my rescue, spreading a refreshing balm upon my fevered emotions. "*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*" (John 3:16). "*For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:23-24). "*For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Romans 6:23). Many other texts came to mind, texts that I now knew because I had heard them often on the radio over station HCJB.

## **Holy Mother Church**

The idea came to me that I should talk to my superior. A very wise man and a real father to everyone, he had already noticed my attitude. I had changed, he commented; something was wrong. I told him why I had changed. He let me talk. In concluding my confession I said to him: "I would like not only to read and study the Bible, but also to try to adapt my life to it, to live according to what is written in it without impositions of men." The reply was very vague. He didn't want to offend me. He counseled me to continue reading the Bible, but reminded me that I must maintain my faithfulness to the teachings of our "mother, the holy church," to whom one must submit even in the things one does not understand. I listened to my superior with all the respect that I owed him. He was not himself sure of his salvation. But in my heart I had lost faith in my church because it didn't teach the assurance of salvation. A split had already been made in my heart which was going to grow larger and break everything, and that quicker than I thought.

The light dawned in my heart at the moment that I least expected it. It was my turn to preach in my parish. For that Sunday I had chosen as my theme, "Religious Hypocrisy," and availed myself of the Bible text: "*Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*" (Matthew 7:21-23).

## **The Holy Spirit Works**

I knew my parishioners; I wanted to draw their attention to the vainglory manifested by certain persons with respect to their good works, forgetting that very often these good works camouflaged a corrupt heart. As I delivered my message, I was conscious that the Word of God was coming back to me, as a ping-pong ball that flies back and hits the player in the face. It is curious to see how the human spirit, in just a few seconds, can construct a complete framework of thought, which would perhaps require hours to be put into words. It was thus that, while I was giving my message, someone else was speaking in my heart and preaching a sermon to me that was precisely adapted to my personal needs. I thought that, because I was religious and a priest, I was better than all those who were listening to me. And yet, to me also, this word would resound one day in my ears: "*I never knew you: depart from me.*"

I heard my own arguments in the face of this menace and this condemnation: "How is it possible, my God, that You will not know me? Am I not Your priest? Am I not religious? Look at all the sacrifices I have made for You: the years of study, the separation from my parents and my country, my vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, consecrating to You all my riches, my will, my body even, in order to better serve You. And You will say to me that You never knew me? Consider all the sufferings that I have endured during my missionary life: I have not always eaten to my fill, I have cried with those who cried, I have baptized children by the hundreds, I have listened to all sorts of confessions, I have comforted so many tearful, discouraged souls, I have suffered cold, loneliness, contempt, ingratitude, threats...I am ready even to give my life for You..."

But in spite of all the arguments that I presented to God, the same condemnation continued to ring in my ears: "*I never knew you....*" I was at the end of arguments, at the end of my strength. I felt as if I were going to break down and cry right there before the parishioners, who also sensed the approaching storm. And down the storm broke. The tears prevented me from continuing my sermon. The discouragement when confronted with this terrible frustration of my whole life purpose, in face of my sins and the condemnation of God, was too much for me to bear. I took refuge in my office.

There, on my knees, I waited until calm returned. Where could I turn now? Perhaps my theology would save me, if I returned to it and faithfully followed all its dogmas and precepts. But that theology to which I considered attaching myself once again had already begun to experience disorder, change, destruction. My thoughts turned to my friends. But they were in the same situation as I: uncertain. Trust in myself? I could no longer count on my good works. To look at me, I was a total wreck. I could do no more; I was in a state of complete exhaustion, depressed and discouraged. This was God's moment to give me His grace. "Man's extremity is God's opportunity."

## **After Conviction - The Answer**

During all my reflections, God was preparing His Word of salvation: *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast”* (Ephesians 2:8-9). It was here that I understood my error and the reason for God’s rejection. I had been trying to save myself by my works; God wanted to save me by grace. Someone else had already taken care of my sins and of the judgment attached to them. This someone was Jesus Christ. It was for this that He died on the Cross. It was for the sins of another that He died, for He Himself had never sinned. For whose sins, then, did He die? Could it be mine? Yes, mine. I remembered the Words of Jesus: *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). I understood that I must go to Jesus if I wanted to have the assurance of salvation and peace of soul. I had the intention of asking Him: *“But where are you Jesus, so that I might cling to you?”* But even before this cry of impatience arose in my heart, the Lord comforted by heart through His Word.

Now I knew where Jesus was. He was closer than I had thought. And I hurried to invite Him to enter into my heart, without taking the time to ask permission of any man *“Come in, Lord Jesus; come into my heart. Be its Leader, its Master, O Beloved Savior.”* At that moment I knew that I was freed from the punishment that had menaced me for such a long time. I was saved—pardoned. I had eternal life. God had begun His work in me. Now I understood the Word that I had heard so often and which had become real to me: *“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”* (II Corinthians 5:21). *“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5).

## **My Struggle to Continue**

What happened after that? At first I continued my priestly service as best I could. But little by little I began to feel like a stranger in that position. I realized that the grace that had saved me, that had made of me a child of God, was going to enter into conflict with the “works” of the position in which I was trying to live. I was happy because I had the assurance of my salvation. But I was stifled in a setting in which I was pushed to do good works in order to merit my salvation. Salvation, I had; therefore, all of these works began to be put aside, one after the other. The orientation and presentation of my preaching changed. All that interested me was Jesus Christ: Who He was and what He had done.

I abandoned the subjects prepared in advance by the liturgical organization of the diocese, in order to devote all of my efforts to the Person and work of my beloved Savior, presenting Him as such to my bewildered parishioners, confused but often edified. I asked to be released from my functions as a parish priest, since I could no longer preach that which contradicted the Word of God. My superiors accepted my resignation, though they could not understand why I wanted to leave. They had, in fact, treated me very well, indulged me in many ways; as far as they were concerned, I lacked nothing. This was true, as far as food, clothing,

housing, etc., were concerned. But now I had the assurance of my salvation. Christ was now my Master. I had nothing more to do to gain my salvation; it had been gained by Another. He would therefore take it upon Himself to continue the work begun, since He never does His work by halves.

### **Christians Visit Me**

I returned to Quebec, Canada, in 1965, for an extended period of rest. Shortly after, Evangelical Christians visited me. How did they know of my interest in the Word of God? They were frank with me: the personnel of HCJB radio station had given my name to them. However, even if I found their conversation very edifying, I did not give myself wholly to them. I did not want to fall into another theological system, having been suppressed for years by the system into which I had been born and in which I had grown up and lived during some 40 years. Nevertheless, I prayed to the Lord to find for me brothers and sisters to whom I could join myself, so that I would not feel so alone.

I knew the experience of the first Christians, according to the report given in Acts, "*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*" (Acts 2:42). Was it possible that Christians still met together in our day in order to remember the Lord, while awaiting His return? God, Who had provided for the salvation of my soul, would provide again, in order to disclose to me the existence of His children.

### **New Duty**

My superiors in Montreal called me one day to invite me to replace a Professor of Theology in a College in Rouyn. I hesitated about accepting the position, principally because I had never liked the Abitibi region, of which Rouyn is the main city. However, I accepted, since it would be only for a few months. The subject I was given to teach was "The Church." I was given access to all of the books that would be necessary for the preparation of my classes.

I began my preparations using only the Bible. I explained to the students what the church is, according to the Bible. I admit that I had difficulty myself in understanding what I was teaching. It was such a contrast to the hierarchical church in which I still found myself. I very much enjoyed the study of this subject. I used a little tape recorder to illustrate the lessons, playing for the students certain interviews that I held with the general public in different places of the city.

One day I learned from the newspaper that a television program was to be presented having as its subject: "The Church." I recorded the program in order to use it in my classes and discovered that the subject was treated from the point of view of what the Bible taught. I was so impressed by the similarity between the presentation by this unknown person, whom I later learned was an Evangelical Christian, and my own, that I sent a note of thanks to the preacher, inviting him to come to see me, if this were possible. He came, and I recognized in him someone who knew the Lord. After several visits, he invited me to his home to spend Sunday with him and his family. On the occasion of that visit, I attended a "Remembrance of the Lord" service for the first time.

## **God Answers Prayer**

I recognized in this service that which was described in I Corinthians 11 and realized that God had answered my prayer, having led me to my brothers and sisters in the Lord, and having shown me that Christians in our day do indeed meet together as a local church to remember the Lord while awaiting His return. *“For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come”* (I Corinthians 11:26).

Shortly after, I wrote my superiors in Montreal, announcing to them the news that I had found my family and requesting that they obtain for me a dispensation from all the vows I had made to the Roman Catholic Church, since I no longer considered myself a member. My life now belonged to the Lord and its direction was henceforth under His control.

## **New Life in the Lord**

It was thus that the Lord liberated me, not only from my sins, not only from His condemnation, but also from every system of man, which burdens and suppresses. *“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death”* (Romans 8:1-2).