

Resistance and Obedience to God: Memoirs of David Ferris (1707-1779)

excerpt, pp. 46-54

I will now recur to the time when I first joined the Society of Friends. After I was admitted into membership, I diligently attended all our meetings for worship and discipline; and greatly admired the beautiful order established in the society, and the living gospel ministry with which we were favored. After I had been a member about one year, I was concerned to appear in the ministry, and excite the careless to a consideration of their “latter end.” I had passed through many vicissitudes and tribulations; but when this concern was laid upon me, it seemed heavier than any thing I had ever had to bear. I thought I could never be resigned to it. When I was called out of the vanities of my youth, and was obliged to submit to the cross of Christ, to become a laughing-stock and a by-word to my companions and acquaintances, I was so humbled, so mortified, and *self* so much abased, I thought I could submit to any thing that might afterwards be required of me. Again, when I passed through that great trial of leaving college, in the manner before related, and had to deny all the honors, friendships, pleasant connections, and riches of the world, I concluded I should never again meet with so great a trial. But I was mistaken. This far exceeded all I had previously encountered. I, however, submitted so far as to speak a few times in our meetings; and then, through great fear that I should not be able to persevere, I was induced to be silent, and postpone the performance of this duty until a more “convenient season,” or more full manifestation of the divine will. I concluded, that if I should continue for any considerable time to appear as a minister, and afterwards should be silent, it would bring greater dishonor on my profession than thus to cease at an early period of such a concern. Sometimes I hoped that at a future meeting the trial would not be so severe; at others, that more strength would be granted me. Thus I reasoned, from month to month and year to year, during seven years. In all which time the concern was often so heavy, that I sat and trembled through the time of meeting, and then went away full of sorrow, trouble and pain of heart.

For several years after this I seldom felt this concern; yet I was still sensible that I had a work of this kind to do, and felt great pain in neglecting it. I saw no way to obtain peace of mind but by a submission to the cross, and becoming willing to be accounted a fool; and this being a severe trial, I evaded it. Sometimes I had a faint hope that I should yet obtain strength to proceed in the work, at other times I was almost in despair.

Thus I passed along for fifteen years; during which time my error was manifested to me in various ways. Sometimes by the Holy Spirit, showing me that “obedience is better than sacrifice, and to hearken to the voice of the Lord, than the fat of rams.” Sometimes by the ministry of his messengers; and sometimes by dreams, &c. Thus, in great mercy, the Lord followed me as he did Ephraim of old, saying, “How shall I give thee up, O Ephraim?”¹

One night I dreamed that I saw a large, spacious building, in an unfinished state; and the master builder, who appeared an excellent person, came to me as I stood at a distance, and desired me to go and take a view of it; to which I agreed; and as we were surveying it, and examining the particular parts, I observed that among the many pillars, erected for the support of the building, there was one lacking. I queried of him, what was the cause of that vacancy. He

¹Hosea 11:8. Hosea uses the image of God, the unrequited lover, continuing to pursue Israel/Ephraim.

replied, it was left for me; and that I was specially designed and prepared for the place, and showed me how I fitted it, like a mortise is fitted to its tenon. So that I saw in my dream that all he said was true. But, notwithstanding all this, I objected to my capacity and fitness to fill the vacancy, and was therefore unwilling to occupy it. He endeavored, by the most convincing reasons, to remove all my objections, and to demonstrate that I was fitted for the place. He further told me that they had not another prepared for it; and that the building would be retarded if I did not comply with the design. After he had reasoned with me a long time, and I still refused, he appeared to be grieved, and told me it was a great pity that I should be rendered useless in the house by my own obstinacy; and then added, "But it must not be so; for if thou wilt not be a pillar, thou shalt be a plank for the floor." He then showed me how I might be flatted and prepared for that purpose. But I refused that place also, on the ground that it looked too diminutive to be a plank to be trod upon by all who came into the house. At this the master was troubled, seeing I would accept no place that was offered me; but, after a long debate, he concluded to leave the propositions he had made for my further consideration; and so we parted.

The next day I was at a meeting on Long Island, and a concern came heavily upon me to say something that was presented to my mind. The burden of the word was weighty, and more difficult to remove than usual; but I contended with it, and at length refused to comply. I was then in company with two women Friends travelling in the ministry. The following night one of them dreamed that she saw me sitting by a pleasant stream of water; before me a table was spread with all manner of dainties; but I was chained, so that I could not reach any of them; at which she was troubled, and asked the master of the feast why I was deprived of the liberty to partake of the good things on the table. He answered, that the time had been when, on certain conditions, I might have enjoyed them to the full, but that I had refused the terms, and therefore was now justly deprived of them. She inquired of him whether this must always be my case. He answered, perhaps not; that if I would yet submit, and comply with the terms, it was not too late to partake of all the good things she saw. The interpretation of this dream, and of mine the night before, was easy and plain. They rested on my mind for several years, as cause of humbling instruction, and excitement to future care, diligence and obedience.

The next day, as we were travelling towards a town where we intended to have a meeting the following day, we were informed that a people called the New-Lights² were to have a meeting there the same day, and that we might, probably, get there at the time their meeting was sitting. As soon as I heard it, I thought the word of the Lord passed through me, saying, "Thou must go to that meeting." I knew not the object, but supposed it might be to bear a testimony against their errors in worship and practice, and to proclaim the truths of the gospel in their hearing. I rode on without speaking to my companions, but the concern remained weightily with me. I endeavored, as usual, to get from under it, saying to my Master, "I am in no wise qualified for the service," and desiring that he would send by those who were fitted for such a work, or, as Moses said, "by whom he would send," so that I might be excused. Whilst I was struggling to evade this service, one of the women turned to me and said, "Why canst thou not go to this meeting of New-Lights, and proclaim to them the Truth, as our Friends did, formerly?" Her speech added fuel to the fire that was burning within me. I thought it came with divine authority;

²New Lights were those, especially Congregationalists and Presbyterians, touched by the evangelical fervor of the First Great Awakening. They were opposed by establishment "Old Lights" who resisted the idea that God could be revealed directly to individuals without regard to church structure. A 1741 Synod expelled many New Lights, who organized the dynamic Synod of New York the following year. The main seminary for New Lights was Princeton, but they also drew enthusiastic ministers from Yale and Harvard.

but I made her no reply, having before as much as I could well bear. I, however, felt an engagement to press forward; and when we arrived at the house where we intended to tarry for refreshment, being under great exercise of mind, I walked backward and forward across the room. The friend who had spoken to me on the road, I observed, was under great exercise also. I walked and reasoned as long as I well could. At length the power of opposition was overcome, and I was obliged to submit. I then observed to the friend, "I believe I must go to that meeting." She replied, "I believe so also." The landlord, hearing what was said, proposed to go with me, and I accepted of his offer. So being pressed in spirit to make haste, we set out, and coming to the meeting house, I stepped on the door-sill to go in, and at that instant the meeting broke up. I then stepped aside, and stood still in retirement of mind, waiting to know my duty. The people rushed out of the house, and I found my mind relieved of concern; so I was easy to return without further service. I believed the *will* to act, in this case, was accepted for the deed, and I returned in peace.

Thus, was I shown that my divine Master was able to bring me to a state of submission to his holy will; and I then concluded, that if he would excuse me from such a trying service, I would no longer refuse to speak among those of my own persuasion.

But after all this, I proceeded with a heavy heart, being sensible that my work was neglected. It was several years after this occurrence, before I fully submitted to the divine will; in all which time I went on lamenting my unfaithfulness. Sometimes I had a hope, as it were, *against hope*, that I should obtain a victory over that slavish fear which had so long enthralled me. At other times I was ready to conclude there was no cause to hope for deliverance from it. Yet, during this period, I was not wholly forsaken by my divine Master, but was enabled to perform, I hope with acceptance, some services for him; such as warning the drunkard, the profane swearer and the liar, of the evil of their ways, and advising them to repent. Sometimes, during this period, I was also concerned to accompany Friends who were engaged to visit religious meetings in distant places, in yielding to which I found peace.³ Yet, when abroad on such services, and my call to the ministry was brought into view, the sense of my neglect sunk my spirits, and pain of heart attended me. Thus I spent more than twenty years!

Although, as has been mentioned, I had been many times invited, and had received indubitable evidence of the divine will, both immediately and instrumentally, so that every doubt was removed from my mind, yet the fear of man, the fear of missing my way, the fear of doing more harm than good, prevailed against me; so that I thought I should never be able to submit to the divine will concerning me. But towards the termination of the aforesaid time I felt more lively, and a concern to appear in the ministry revived. Being from home, at a meeting, I was concerned to say something to the people; but, according to my usual custom, I postponed it till a more convenient season. On this account I left the meeting in great heaviness and sorrow, for my disobedience. On the following night I dreamed that I saw two generals drawing up their armies in order of battle. Each captain had his men in order, ready to obey the command of their general, and stood at their head waiting for orders to march and stand in the engagement where he should command them. One of the generals came to a captain, who stood near me, and said to him, "You are a valiant man, and skilful in the art of war; therefore march into the right wing of

³Margaret Bacon suggests that a reference to "D.F." in the journal of Elizabeth Hudson indicates that David Ferris was travelling with John Griffith in New Jersey in Third Month [May] 1747. *Wilt Thou Go On My Errand?*, 139, 275.

the army, and in front of the battle.” But the captain objected to the post assigned him, and pleaded his unfitness for it, saying, “It is a place of danger, and requires a man better qualified for such a post.” The general answered that he was well qualified for the place allotted him, and that if he took it he might, by his skill and valor, do eminent service for his king and country, and gain great honor, which would be a means of promoting him to places of higher trust. He however desired to be excused and could not be persuaded to take the post assigned him. I stood by and heard all the general’s arguments to persuade him to comply, until I was filled with indignation at the captain’s obstinacy, especially as the general had *absolute* authority to *command*, and yet was so kind as to use *entreaty* and *persuasion*. I then said to the general, “It is my judgment that this captain is not worthy of the place assigned him, since he refuses to serve his king and country according to his capacity, and rejects the honor and promotion he might obtain. Were I in the general’s place, I would set him in the rear of the army, where he will have less opportunity of promotion, and may lose his life as well as in the front.” To this the general replied, “The decision is just, and in the rear he shall stand,” where he was accordingly stationed.

I awoke from my sleep in great distress, under a sense of the just judgment which (like David⁴) I had passed on myself. From this time, during several months, I was on the brink of despair; concluding I was wholly unworthy to stand in front, and, therefore, should be placed in the rear, to be killed in obscurity. After a time of great anxiety and distress of mind, the Lord was graciously pleased to look upon me with compassion, and again offered to make me a pillar in his house; and I felt a renewed concern to appear in public for his name, and in the cause of Truth.

In the year 1755, being in company with Comfort Hoag⁵ and her companion,⁶ from New England, then on a religious visit to Friends in this part of the country, I attended a meeting with them, in which I felt a concern to speak to the assembly, but, as usual, evaded it. After meeting Comfort said to me, “David, why didst thou not preach to day?” I smiled at the query, seeming to wonder that she should ask such a question, and endeavored to appear innocent and ignorant of any concern of that kind. As she knew nothing of me but what she had felt, (having never before seen or heard of me,) she said no more. On the following day a similar concern came upon me, and I evaded it as before. After meeting, Comfort again said to me, “David, why didst thou not preach to-day?” I endeavored to pass it by as I did before; but she said it was not worth while to evade it, for she was assured that I ought to have preached that day, and that I had almost spoiled her meeting by refraining, which had hindered her service. When I found I could not conceal my faults, I confessed the whole, and told her I had been for more than twenty years in that practice; and then gave her a history of my life from the beginning down to that day. She

⁴See the story of David and the prophet Nathan, II Samuel, 12:1-13.

⁵Comfort (Stanyon) Hoag (afterwards Comfort Collins) was a lively minister of the gospel, from the Colony of Massachusetts. She travelled extensively on this Continent, and left many seals of her ministry in places where she had been called to labor: She was living in 1815, at the advanced age of one hundred and five years. Although her natural faculties were then much impaired, yet the happy effects of a religious life shone forth conspicuously through all the weakness and decay of extreme old age. A Friend, who visited her in the aforesaid year, says, “a Peculiar innocence, calmness and quietude appeared in her countenance and manner of expression, manifesting that the spiritual life was unimpaired by the decay of the natural faculties and powers.” Comfort was born about 1711. The same story repeated above has also been given as occurring in 1812 when she was 101 and still full of religious sensibility, although she had lost the rest of her faculties, as to memory of husband or children. Another story often repeated was that Comfort left for a religious visit to Europe with Sarah Barney of Nantucket about 1760. Comfort remarked to Sarah that she believed they would not get to Europe but “I believe the will is taken for the deed.” The ship sprang a leak and they returned home.

⁶Elizabeth Dean. *Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes*, 27. The editor mistakenly dates the incident to 1765.

admired that divine kindness was yet manifested me in such manner, seeing I had so long rebelled against it, and then gave me suitable caution and advice.

The following day, being at meeting, I again felt a concern to speak to the people, but endeavored to evade it. A man of some note was sitting before me, which increased my reluctance to speak. I supposed he would not be present at the next meeting; and then I would obey the call of the Lord to that service. Thus I spent the greater part of an hour. At length my divine Master, the great Master Builder, thus addressed me, "Why dost thou still delay, desiring to be excused until a more convenient season? There never will be a better time than this. I have waited on thee above twenty years; I have clearly made known to thee my will, so that all occasion of doubt has been removed; yet thou hast refused to submit until thy day is far spent; and if thou dost not speedily comply with my commands, it will be too late; thy opportunity will be lost." I then clearly saw that if I were forsaken, and left to myself, the consequence would be death and darkness forever! At the sight of the horrible pit that yawned for me, if I continued in disobedience, my body trembled like an aspen leaf, and my soul was humbled within me! Then I said, "Lord! here am I; make of me what thou wouldst have me to be; leave me not in displeasure, I beseech thee." All my power to resist was then suspended; I forgot the great man that had been in my way; and was raised on my feet, I hardly knew how, and expressed in a clear and distinct manner what was on my mind. When I had taken my seat Comfort Hoag rose, and had an open, favorable opportunity to speak to the assembly. After the time we had sat in meeting she told me that during the time we had sat in silence, her whole concern was on my account; that her anxiety for my deliverance from that bondage was such, that she was willing to offer up her natural life to the Lord, if it might be a means to bring me forth in the ministry; and that on making the offering I rose to speak. On which her anxiety for me was removed, and her mind filled with concern for the people present.

At that time I was made a real Quaker, and was not ashamed to be seen trembling before the Lord. Under a sense of so great and merciful a deliverance, I saw and felt ample cause for it. It was with me as with Israel of old, when the Lord caused their captivity to return, saying he would build them as at the first, and they should fear and tremble for all his goodness, and for all the prosperity he would procure for them. My soul rejoiced in the Lord, and I magnified his excellent name, who is worthy of all honor, glory and renown forever.

It appeared to me wonderful, that I should thus be lifted out of this horrible pit of my own digging, and I was so absorbed in the love and mercy of my heavenly Benefactor, that I was filled with thankfulness and praise, attended with a desire that, in future, I might diligently watch and wait for the pointing of his holy finger to every service he might be pleased to allot me, that so no opportunity might be lost of manifesting my gratitude by obedience to his will. My feelings were like those of a prisoner who had been long in bonds and was set at liberty.

This appearance in the public ministry was in the year 1755, and in the forty-eighth year of my age. After which it was never so great a cross to speak in meetings as it had been before. At many times, during my long silence, I had a sight that, if I were obedient to my duty, I might be made a useful member of the church, and as a pillar in God's house; but having so long rebelled, I now had no reason to expect that I should be so useful as I might have been, had I rendered early obedience to the heavenly call. However, it appeared necessary, if little were

committed to my care, to be faithful in that little. Sometimes I had a hope of being useful to my fellow creatures; at other times I was left to myself, and humbled under a sense of my own inability to do any thing to the honor of God, or the help of others.