



This I Have Longed For:

Excerpt from
*Experiences in the Life
of Mary Penington*

Of a Growth in Grace Amidst Distressing Exercises of Spirit

*A Letter to Bridget Atley
from Isaac Penington*

This I Have Longed For

My relations made this cross very heavy; but as at length I happily gave up, divested of reasonings, not consulting how to provide for the flesh, I received strength to attend the meetings of these despised people which I never intended to meddle with, but found truly of the Lord, and my heart owned them. I longed to be one of them, and minded not the cost or pain; but judged it would be well worth my utmost cost and pain to witness such a change as I saw in them—such power over their corruptions. I had heard objected against them, that they wrought not miracles; but I said that they did great miracles, in that they turned them that were in the world and the fellowship of it, from all such things.

Thus, by taking up the cross, I received strength against many things which I had thought impossible to deny; but many tears did I shed, and bitterness of soul did I experience, before I came thither; and often cried out: "I shall one day fall by the overpowering of the enemy." But Oh! the joy that filled my soul in the first meeting ever held in our house at Chalfont. To this day I have a fresh remembrance of it. It was then the Lord enabled me to worship him in that which was undoubtedly his own, and give up my whole strength, yea, to swim in the life which overcame me that day. Oh! long had I desired to worship him with acceptation, and lift up my hands without doubting, which I witnessed that day in that assembly. I acknowledged his great mercy and wonderful kindness; for I could say, "This is it which I have longed and waited for, and feared I never should have experienced."

Mary Penington

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no date

My dear Friend:

If thy heart come to feel the seed of God, and to wait upon him in the measure of his life, he will be tender of thee as a father of his child, and his love will be naturally breaking forth towards thee. This is the end of all his dealings with thee, to bring thee hither, to make thee fit and capable of entering and abiding here. And he hath changed, and doth change thy spirit daily; though it be as the shooting up of the corn, whose growth cannot be discerned at present by the most observing eye, but it is very manifest afterwards that it hath grown. My heart is refreshed for thy sake, rejoicing in the Lord's goodness towards thee; and that the blackness of darkness begins to scatter from thee, though the enemy be still striving the same way to enter and distress thee again. But wait to feel the relieving measure of life, and heed not distressing thoughts, when they arise ever so strongly in thee; nay, though they have entered thee, fear them not, but *be still a while, not believing in the power which thou feelest they have over thee*, and it will fall on a sudden.

It is good for thy spirit, and greatly to thy advantage, to be much and variously exercised by the Lord. Thou dost not know what the Lord hath already done, and what he is yet doing for thee therein. Ah! how precious it is to be poor, weak, low, empty, naked, distressed for Christ's sake, that way may be made for the power and glory of this life in the heart! And, oh, learn daily more and more, to trust him and hope in him, and not to be affrighted with any amazement, nor to be taken up with the sight of the present thing; but wait for the shutting

of thy own eye upon every occasion, and for the opening of the eye of God in thee, and for the sight of things therewith, as they are from him. It is no matter what the enemy strives to do in thy heart, nor how distressed thy condition is, but what the Lord will do for thee, which is with patience to be waited for at his season in every condition. And though sin overtake, let not that bow down; not let the eye open in thee, which stands poring at that: but wait for the healing through the chastisement, and know there is an Advocate, who, in that hour, hath an office of love and a faithful heart towards thee. Yea, though thou canst not believe, yet be not dismayed thereat; thy Advocate, who undertakes thy cause, hath faith to give; only do thou sink into, or at least pant after the hidden measure of life, which is not in that which distresseth, disturbeth, and filleth thee with thoughts, fears, troubles, anguish, darknesses, terrors, and the like; no, no! but in that which inclines to the patience, to the stillness, to the hope, to the waiting, to the silence before the Father: this is the same in nature, with the most refreshing and glorious-visiting life, though not the same in appearance; and if thy mind be turned to it, not minding but overlooking the other, thou wilt find some of the same virtue springing up in thy heart and soul, at least to stay thee.

In and through these things, thou wilt become deeply acquainted with the nature of God, and know the wonderful riches and virtue of his life, the mightiness of his power, and the preciousness of his love, tenderness of his mercy, and infiniteness of his wisdom, the glory and exactness of his righteousness, &c.: thou wilt be made large in spirit to receive and drink in abundantly of them; and the snares of the enemy will be so known to thee and discerned, the way of help so

manifest and easy, that their strength will be broken, and the poor entangled bird will fly away singing, from the nets and entanglements of the fowler; and praises will spring up, and great love in thy heart to the Forgiver and Redeemer. Oh, wait, hope, trust, look up to thy God! look over that which stands between; come into his mercy! let in the faith which openeth the way of life, which will shut out the distrusting and doubting mind, and will close up the wrong eye, that letteth in reasonings and temptations, the wrong sense, and death with them.

Thus mayest thou witness, in and through thy Redeemer, the abundance of his life and peace.

Isaac Penington



Mary and Isaac Penington

Isaac Penington (1616-1679) and Mary Penington (1621-1682) grew up in Puritan households actively involved in the religious and political struggles leading to the English Civil War between the Royalist faction and the supporters of Parliament, the execution of Charles I, and the establishment of Oliver Cromwell's protectorship. Mary Penington's first husband, Sir William Springett, was a colonel in the Parliamentary army and died of typhus following the siege of Arundel in 1644. Isaac Penington's father, a prominent member of Parliament, served as Lord Mayor of London and on Cromwell's Council of State. With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the elder Penington was convicted of treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he died in 1661.

Isaac Penington was educated at Cambridge University. Gentle by nature and not physically strong, he devoted himself to writing. Even before joining Friends he had published eleven theological works which reflect years of painful religious questioning. In 1654 he married Lady Mary Springett, a young widow with a ten-year-old daughter, Gulielma. "Both Isaac and Mary Penington were seekers, travelers in the spiritual life," writes Douglas Steere in Quaker Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1984, 139). ". . . Both were yearning always for more inward religion than they had discovered." In 1656 they first became acquainted with Quakers. Although they felt some attraction to Friends and began to associate with them, they could not immediately reject all that went with their own station in life—"the language, fashions, customs, titles, honour, and esteem in the world." Moreover, in a time when religious toleration was unknown, to be a Quaker meant likely persecution. Nevertheless, after they had heard George Fox speak at a great gathering of Friends in 1658, the Peningtons gave themselves wholeheartedly and joyfully to the Society. They soon became leaders, providing a base for travelers in the ministry and nurturing Friends with their hospitality and spiritual counsel. Now Isaac Penington's writings were an eloquent expression of the spiritual experience of Friends.

Through faithfulness to the Quaker testimonies the Peningtons suffered the loss of much of their property and even the confiscation of their house. In 1661 Isaac Penington was arrested for holding a meeting for worship in his home, then imprisoned for three months because he would not use an oath in court. Between 1661 and 1672 he spent more than five years in jail, in six separate imprisonments. In spite of squalid prison conditions and fragile health, he continued to write essays on Quaker beliefs and letters of spiritual counsel to meetings and individuals. During his long absences, Mary Penington, like so many other Quaker women of the period, managed the household, raised the children, worked to relieve the sufferings of those in prison, and supported the Quaker movement.

Although the Toleration Act would not be passed until 1689, the intensity of persecution diminished. The Peningtons were able to pass their later years in relative tranquility, continuing their ministries among Friends, enjoying their family life, rejoicing in Gulielma's marriage to young William Penn.

Those who knew Isaac Penington and those who know him only through his writings often refer to his sweetness of spirit. Douglas Steere writes, "The word that described this gentle, tender, loving Friend, Isaac Penington, with great discernment was, 'He was not stiff or stout in the defense of his own building.' . . . Mary Penington's complete sharing of her husband's witness made possible his courageous struggle for religious liberty" (ibid., 141). Mary Penington, too, has left Friends with a lively sense of her presence through an autobiographical manuscript she completed for her grandson Springett (Guli's son). It was published in 1911 as Experiences in the Life of Mary Penington.

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