

# JOHN WESLEY - Evangelist, Disciple-maker, Methodical Pietist

## HOME BACKGROUND

John Wesley was born in an Anglican rectory (church parsonage) in England in 1703. He was the 15th of 19 children of Samuel and Susannah Wesley. When John was age 5, their house caught on fire. Everyone else got out but John was stranded on the 2nd floor. However, he was safely rescued when someone was hoisted on another's shoulders to reach him. Later he would refer to himself as "A brand plucked out of fire" based on Zechariah 3:2. Later, we will see how God used John to rescue multitudes of others from a more serious fire.....an eternal one.

The Wesley home was a place for godliness and learning. The kids were expected to be proficient in Latin and Greek and were to learn major portions of the New Testament by heart. Although Susannah had 19 children, she found time to pray one hour a day. She would lift her apron up over her face and enter her prayer closet. The kids knew that she was not to be disturbed while she was meeting with God. John had a great heritage with a father, two grandfathers and one great-grandfather who were ministers.

## A STUDENT AND A 'HOLY' CLUB

This studious background helped influence John to attend Oxford University and he was ordained as an Anglican minister. While there, he led a Club which was started by his brother Charles. Its purpose was the study and pursuit of a devout Christian life. They met daily for 3 hours. Its members made a vow to:

Lead holy lives.....Have communion once a week.....pray daily and every waking hour at least for a few minutes..... visit prisons regularly. They also fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays until 3PM (which was a pattern of the early church). Other students derisively called it: The 'Holy' Club. We know another member of the club who would later become quite famous - George Whitefield.

John would preach on faith to the students and faculty at Oxford, but still felt that he did not have the faith he wanted or knew that he needed. His comforters assured him that he had faith, but he wanted a faith that was free from doubt, fear and the domination by sin. In order to find this faith, at age 32 he accepted an invitation to be a missionary to America as a pastor to British colonists in Savannah, Georgia. He wrote in his journal....."I was not seeking any honor. Purely and simply, I was seeking to live wholly to the glory of God and to save my own soul."

## MISSIONARY TO AMERICA - SEEKING FAITH

On the ship to America, John would see the frailty of his faith. A fierce storm came up and broke the mast off of their ship. All the Englishmen, including John, were struck with panic. Not so another group on the ship. They calmly continued to pray and sing hymns unto the Lord. They were Moravian Christians sent to America as missionaries to the Indians. John wrote in his journal: "By God's grace I was able to have direct witness of this living faith through a group

of Germans soon after leaving for the mission field.. There were 26 of these unusual Christians on the ship.

In mid-ocean, we encountered three violent storms in rapid succession. All the passengers, except these Germans, were in fear for their lives. I had to ask myself, since I was so unwilling to die, "How is it that I have no faith?" The third storm - a hurricane - hit at noon on Sunday. By four it was more violent than any of the other storms. The winds roared and whistled all around us. The ship rocked to and fro with great violence. It shook and jarred with an unequal, grating motion, so that no one could stand without holding on. Shocks came every ten minutes. It seemed as if the shocks would tear the ship apart.

At 7 PM I made my way into the quarters of the Germans. They gave continual proof of their humility. They were willing to do the most menial tasks rejected by others and take no pay. If they were mistreated, they went away without complaint. I wanted to see if they had been freed from fear. I knew they were delivered from anger and revenge. But what about fear?

I asked one man after the storm, 'Were you not afraid?'. He answered, 'I thank God I was not'. "But were your women and children afraid?" He replied mildly, 'No, our women and children are not afraid to die.'

"After that I tried to watch their behavior as often as possible. They were always busy, usefully employed, cheerful and in good humor. They had done away with all strife, anger, bitterness, clamor and evil-speaking. They walked and lived as true witnesses of Christ".

John would later write of his experience in America: 'After two years of poor results in this chosen work, I thought it was time to leave the mission field. I took a ship home. On the return, I had much private time to think about my Christianity. Had this solitude helped me to become more Christian? Not if Jesus Christ is the model of Christianity! My mind was full of thoughts. Some I wrote in my journal.

"I became a missionary to convert the heathens, but oh, who shall convert me? Who, what is He who will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well, and believe myself while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.

## **RETURN TO ENGLAND - FINDING FAITH**

On the last evening aboard ship, I wrote this review of my situation. 'It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach heathens the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, what I least of all suspected! I went to the mission field to convert others, but was never myself converted to God.'

John went on to mention all the merits that he thought he had like so many others thought about themselves. He had studied philosophy, ancient and modern languages, theology and could talk about spiritual things. Was a generous giver of his money and time. Was willing to work hard, suffer and 'give up friends, reputation, comfort and country, risked his life at sea, been parched with heat, consumed by work and weariness, or whatever it pleased God to allow upon me.' "This is what I have learned in my travels and services. I am fallen short of the glory

of God. My whole heart is altogether corrupt and abominable. As a result, my whole life cannot produce good fruit because I am an evil tree. I am alienated from the life of God as a child of wrath, an heir of hell..... my only hope is that if I seek Jesus, I shall find Christ. Then I shall...

*'Be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law but but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith  
- Philippians 3:9*

John went on to explain that he was thankful for the time as a missionary. God had humbled him and had shown him what was truly in his heart. He was also able to meet some of God's true servants. Within a week of his return to England, John met three more Moravian Christians who had the faith he sought. One of them, Peter Bohler, amazed him with his accounts of a **living faith**. He explained to John that the fruits of holiness and happiness were part of such a faith. John accepted it as truth and began to preach it to the condemned in prison. One prisoner went to his death in perfect peace in Christ. John had trouble believing that this could be an 'instantaneous' work of God, but found it to be true as he studied the Book of Acts. "To my utter astonishment I found scarcely any instances of conversions except the instantaneous kind. Few were as slow as that of Paul who was three days in the labor of the new birth."

Peter brought John some friends who were living examples of a living faith in Christ brought about by instant conversions. John asked God to help his unbelief. John's brother Charles was opposed to this new understanding of faith which he scornfully called 'new faith'. John writes: 'It made him angry to hear me say that I did not have real faith.' But after Charles spent some time with Peter, he came to true faith on Pentecost Sunday of 1738. God healed him of pleurisy and gave him **living faith** in a moment. He saw that we were saved through grace alone. John had his own experience 4 days later. On May 24 he went to a prayer meeting on Aldersgate street. He listened to a reading of Luther's preface to the book of Romans. "While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, **I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation.** An assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. The moment I awakened the next morning, the love of Jesus, my Master, was in my heart and in my mouth." **For 35 years John Wesley had a works oriented religion. Now he had come into a grace oriented religion.** **His faith went from the head to the heart. He went from an intellectual faith to a heart faith.**

## **SPIRITUAL ATTACK**

When God moves mightily in our life there is often a counterattack by the enemy. John writes: "Satan injected a fear into me. "If you do believe, why do you not feel a greater change? "That I do not know. But this I know, I now have peace with God. And I do not sin today. Jesus my Master, has forbidden me to take any thought about tomorrow". This answer came from something deep within me. It was not me.

The tempter continued: "But is not any sort of fear a proof that you do not believe?" I wanted Jesus to answer for me. I opened the Bible and my eyes fell upon the words of St. Paul. "Without were fightings, within were fears". - 2 Corinthians 7:5. "This inferred that I well may have some fears within me, but I must go on treading them under my feet.'

John Wesley would be attacked by groups as a fanatic, seducer and as one setting forth new doctrines. God gave him grace to remain calm and peaceful. He had a desire to visit the Moravians in Germany, the group from which had come Peter Bohler and the ones he had met on the ship. He spent two months there and saw many **living proofs of the power of faith.** These believers not only had received forgiveness of sins, but had received the Holy Spirit and a new clean heart. They were pietists, who emphasized Bible study, personal religious experience and heart faith as opposed to the formalism, intellectualism, and head knowledge only that dominated the church in that day. (note: These are the Moravians led by Zinzendorf, which had a prayer meeting that lasted 100 years non-stop 24/7. They sent out multitudes of missionaries and changed the world. We will look at them in another message. They truly had a living faith!)

## **HOLY SPIRIT POWER**

John returned from Germany and began to preach this good news of experienced salvation. He had gathered a group of about sixty believers who had this **living faith** through the Holy Spirit. One New Year's eve they held a love feast (the Lord's Supper). He writes:

*"At about three in the morning, as we were continuing in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us. Many cried out in complete joy. Others were knocked to the ground. As soon as we recovered a little from that awe and amazement at God's presence, we broke out in praise. 'We praise you, O God; we acknowledge you to be the Lord.' The Holy Spirit began to move among us with amazing power when we met in His name."*

## **OPEN AIR EVANGELISM**

George Whitefield had been a "Holy" Club member with John Wesley at Oxford. He had a booming voice and a fiery delivery as he preached to large crowds in open fields. So many were being converted to Christ, that George summoned John to help him in his evangelism efforts. John questioned the idea of preaching outdoors. It was a radical idea for that day. However, John soon saw it's effectiveness. Eventually Whitefield and Wesley parted ways over differences in theology. Wesley promoted entire sanctification in this life which was far from Whitefield's Calvinistic beliefs. They also disagreed over the doctrine of predestination. (on a personal note: I grew up hearing a lot about predestination and the teachings of John Calvin, and saw it's effect at times - in hindering a strong belief in evangelism. I was drawn to John Wesley, who emphasized man's responsibility. As we read through the Bible, we see God's part and man's part ..."the Spirit and the Bride say come, drink the water of life". We need balance.) The Reformation leaders brought the Bible and justification by faith back to the church but it was men like Wesley that brought evangelism, missions and revivals back to the church. Throughout the centuries, God has used various people to bring back certain truths that were lost or neglected by the church.

Wesley continued preaching outdoors the rest of his life! He was prohibited from speaking in most churches anyway as traditionalists thought he was too radical. Thus he would say: 'The World is my Parish.' And so it was. He evangelized in Great Britain, Ireland and N. America. He preached 40,000 sermons in 54 years (average of 15 sermons per week). He traveled by

horseback about 4500 miles per year. (figures vary between 4000 - 5000) He was an avid reader and prayed 2 hours per day. He also kept a journal. His personal quotes in this letter are from that journal.

*"What a marvel, the devil doesn't like open air preaching.....neither do I! I love a large room, a soft cushion and a handsome pulpit, but where is my zeal if I do not trample all these under foot in order to save one more soul." - John Wesley*

## **THE GREAT ORGANIZER**

John Wesley was not only a great evangelist, he was also a great organizer and disciple-maker. He had the new converts organized into small classes of 12 including a leader. They met weekly in homes for intensive discipleship and personal accountability. They would pray, read the Bible, discuss their spiritual lives and collect money for charity. Most of these new converts were just ordinary working people, but Wesley's impact through these groups saved England from a bloody revolution like what happened to France in the late 1700's. Jesus Christ had made these new believers salt and light in their communities! By 1798 over 100,000 believers were in these tiny 'house' churches.

Wesley also raised up a large group of unordained (lay) circuit riders. They were sent out to evangelize and keep in touch with the new converts in the small groups. When you see a Methodist church here in America, you are observing the influence of John Wesley through horseback circuit riders like Francis Asbury and others.

## **JOHN WESLEY'S LEGACY**

God used John Wesley to restore evangelism and a missionary spirit to the church. His influence paved the way for the Holiness churches and the Pentecostals. Wesley believed in the second blessing. Finney used the term 'Baptism in the Spirit.

At age 85, Wesley thanked God that he was almost as vigorous as ever. He gave credit to God who helped him to always sleep soundly. He rose at 4 AM for 60 years and for 50 years had preached each morning at 5 AM. Some of John Wesley's character traits were: persistence, a great love for people's souls, a steadfast and tranquil spirit. When John Wesley died in 1791 at the age of 88, he left a long trail of followers who also followed Jesus.

- 294 preachers
- 19 missionaries
- 71,668 British members
- 43,265 American members (198 preachers)

Today there are 30 million Methodists. They and all the rest of the church desperately need the revival spirit that Wesley had. Let us make the following statement by John Wesley a prayer this week and beyond. The same God that transformed John Wesley and used him mightily, can do so in our lives too. **WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN OUR WORLD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST!**

Do all the good you can  
By all the means you can  
In all the ways you can  
In all the places you can  
At all the times you can  
To all the people you can  
As long as ever you can. - John Wesley 1703-1791

By the end of his life, John Wesley was described as "the best loved man in England". When John Wesley entered the gates of heaven, I believe there were a multitude of saints who came to greet him and express their love for him too. They were ones he brought to Christ in his many travels through many dangers, toils and tears. It was worth it all!

### **Our Prayer**

God, we thank you for the life of John Wesley and honor his loving service unto you. Thanks also for his praying mother, Susannah. May you raise up more men and women who live such disciplined and fruitful lives for the name and cause of Jesus Christ. Start with me. Amen!

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