

John Wesley: A Heart Strangely Warmed
Romans 3:22b-28; John 14:15-21
April 27, 2008

My name is John Wesley. I was born over 300 years ago in eighteenth century England. At the turn of the 18th century England was mostly farm land with small towns and a scattered population. Thousands of people were hungry and diseased. The powerful few grew increasingly wealthy at the expense of the poverty-stricken majority. Our country and our church were in need of a revival.

My father, Samuel Wesley, was a priest in the Church of England. Because he was a political activist, it was difficult for him to secure an appointment in a local parish. He finally settled into the Anglican parish at Epworth and remained there 38 years. In 1688 my father was married to Susanna Annesley, one of 25 children. My mother was a spiritual tower of strength and undoubtedly the greatest influence on my spiritual journey. She was quite resolute, strongly independent, business-like, practical, efficient, and determined.

I was the 15th of 19 children born to my parents. Only 10 of us survived infancy. I was born June 28, 1703. My brother Charles was the 18th of 19 children. Charles wrote over 6,000 hymns.

One of my earliest memories is of a fire that destroyed the parsonage that was our home when I was six. It was late at night and everyone had escaped but me. A neighbor stood on the shoulders of a friend and grabbed me from a second story window just moments before the building collapsed. As my rescue came none too soon, I have frequently thought of myself, in the words of Zechariah, as “a brand plucked from the burning.” From then on my mother took special pains to see that I was wholly committed to God.

In my early years I did not attend public or private school. My mother had a poor opinion of the common methods of teaching and governing children. Therefore I was taught at home by my parents until I reached the age of 11. At that time my father arranged for me to attend a private boarding school for boys in London called Charter House. I was taught that one received salvation by following the commandments of God. As a teenager, I hoped to be saved simply by not being as bad as other people, by having a kindness for religion, reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers.

At the age of 18 I entered Christ Church, the most distinguished college at Oxford University. There I studied Greek, German, French, Italian, and Spanish, and developed an insatiable appetite for knowledge. I began to read devotional literature and developed a deep desire to lead a holy life, but a heart-warming assurance of God’s salvation was still missing. I strove to achieve moral perfection by following a set of “rules” which supposedly would keep me free from the sins of idleness, lying, boasting, and unclean thoughts.

After earning my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, I was ordained a priest in the Church of England. I returned to Epworth to assist my father in the leadership of one of his parishes. It was my first and last experience as a parish clergyman. After two years, I returned to Oxford to receive a fellowship at Lincoln College, which allowed me to do graduate work there. The first year they gave me a stipend of 30 lbs. I figured that it took me at the very minimum to live 28 lbs., so I was not able to tithe that year. I only gave 2 lbs. to the poor. By the way, I wrote home and told my parents of my plan, and I gave a list of things that I could do without in order to live on 28 lbs. My mother wrote back to me in a classic letter in which she says, “John, for your health’s sake, get a haircut.” The second year they gave me a 60 lbs. stipend, and I gave 32 lbs. to the poor. The last year they gave a 90 lbs. stipend, in order that a person in the third year of

graduate work at Oxford could live in luxury with servants and maids. I lived on 28 lbs. and I gave the other 62 lbs. away.

Upon my return to Oxford I joined a group of men formed by my brother Charles. We met regularly with an interest in academic excellence. I eventually assumed leadership of the group, which became known as the Holy Club and emphasized spiritual development. We started meeting weekly, then we went to meeting daily. We organized our lives so that we would have time for our studies, for individual prayer and scripture study, and for discussion with each other. We included time for works of charity, including prison visitation, ministry to the sick and dying, and tutoring the illiterate. We took food to the hungry and clothes to the needy.

As I was completing my work at Oxford, an opportunity arose that would take me to the newly established colony of Georgia. It was still in its infancy as the first settlers had arrived only three years earlier. We set sail for America in January, 1736. Our journey was marked by several severe storms. I thought the ship would fall apart and we would die. I had a terrible fear of death. I was not ready to die. I was panicked. I stumbled into a room of German Moravians who were singing and praying as the fierce storms raged on the sea. Later I asked their leader, "How can you be there and not be afraid?" He said, "How can you be afraid if you know God's love? Whether you live or whether you die, you belong to God." Then he said to me, "Don't you know you're saved? Don't you know God's love?" Of course I knew it. Or did I?

We arrived in Savannah. My two years in your country proved to be the lowest point of my life. I had gone with dreams of converting the Indians and establishing the Holy Club in that rugged land. Not only did I not convert the Indians, I also failed to be a priest to the colonists. I left feeling myself a failure and lacking miserably in faith. I yearned for that faith which was "a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ, my sins were forgiven, and I reconciled to the favor of God."

I returned to England and spent much time in the company of Peter Bohler, a young Moravian. I was still trying to earn salvation by my own works, but Peter taught me that works of holiness were the fruit of faith, not the cause of faith. I wondered how I could continue my ministry if I had not the assurance of salvation. Peter said, "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith."

On May 24, 1738, 270 years ago, with great reluctance I went to a meeting on Aldersgate Street where the leader was reading from Martin Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."

I knew then that the love of God was real. Whether we live or whether we die, God loves us. I was so excited! But I realized that there was more to it than this warm feeling of assurance. Because God loved me, I had to do something about it. Now more than ever I had the motivation to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to help fulfill God's will for this world.

I went back to preaching and I did so with fire and zeal. I challenged people to be alive, not dead; they had to change, and they had the power to do it with God's help. Neither the people nor the priests in the Church of England were as enthusiastic about my message. I was turned away from one pulpit after another. So I took to the fields and preached to the miners and to other common folk, often 3,000 in number. A new movement had begun and soon we were preaching to crowds all over the London area again. I realized that I would never again have a parish church, for I saw that "the world is my parish."

I began to organize folks like we were organized in the Holy Club at Oxford. About 12 people would meet together every week in what was called a class. They would pray and study together and hold one another accountable for their Christian discipleship. Larger groups called bands and societies would also meet regularly, promising to do all the good they could and to do no harm. These Society meetings were held within the church. We never left the Church of England. I was always an Anglican Priest. Methodists did not receive the sacraments of baptism and communion at Society meetings because I expected them to continue attendance in the Church of England. It was after my death that the Methodist Church became a separate church in England.

Our movement grew so quickly that there weren't enough preachers to go around preaching to these Methodists. Only four Anglican priests including myself supported our movement. My mother suggested that I use lay people, which I did. The lay people were commissioned to preach at the Methodist Society meetings. Even some women called by God were Methodist preachers in those days. With six lay preachers and four ordained clergy we held our first Annual Conference in June of 1744. I presided over every annual conference in England for 50 years.

In 1751 I was married to a young widow named Molly Vazeille. It was a miserable marriage for Molly as I was a man who was already married – not to my wife, but to a cause, to the Methodist movement.

For fifty years I rose at 4:00 a.m. and retired by 10:00 p.m. I preached an average of three times a day, often beginning at 5:00 a.m. I was very methodical in my use of time, careful to use it wisely for learning or praying or preaching. In the 50 years following my conversion I traveled some quarter of a million miles on horseback and preached some 40,000 sermons. My life ended on March 2, 1791, at the age of 88 years. By that time, death no longer was an enemy which I feared. A few hours before my death, I said to the friends who were with me, "The best of all, God is with us."

My prayer for you is that you know and experience the love of God in your own hearts, as I finally did on Aldersgate Street. May you know what I struggled for years to learn: we are not saved by our works; we are saved only by the grace and love of God poured out for us in the life and death of Jesus Christ our Lord. That, my friends, is the good news of God, which I hope will strangely warm your hearts this day.

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