

SUBJECT: God's Calling in The Present Age: John Wesley and Charles Wesley

SCRIPTURE: Zech. 3:2; Rom. 8:14-18; I Thes. 3:13-4:1,7; 2:10,12; Ps. 98:1-8

AIM: To instill in the children the aspiration to live a life of holiness in the fear of sinning against the Lord and to have a strong desire to please Him.

MEMORY VERSES: Romans 8:16; I Thes. 2:12

CONTENT: John and Charles Wesley were born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Their father and grandfather were Oxford graduates and ordained ministers of the Church of England. They had a strict upbringing. Their mother Susanna took care of her children's early schooling at home and scheduled their time so that none was wasted. The children addressed their parents, servants and siblings formally—*Mother, Father, mistress or master* before the servant's name and even *brother or sister* before the sibling's name, thus *sister Emily* is how they would have addressed their sister.

The children were strictly disciplined for wrongdoing. They were made aware of sin from a young age, and often after a spanking were made to recite Scripture. One night when their house was on fire, five year old John was so fearful of sinning by rising from bed before the nursemaid came, that he just lay in bed calling for someone. When he realized his house was on fire, he sprang from bed and climbed a dresser to a high window. He was rescued, and never forgot that narrow escape.

Because his house had been destroyed, John lived with a common farm family for about a year. He had never before been exposed to such uncultured, ill-mannered people. He endured quite a bit of teasing and learned to let it roll off his back. It turned out to be a good preparation for his coming years in boarding school where the younger boys were often teased by the older ones.

Boarding school at age ten was the beginning of John's formal education. Charles would follow about five years later. There they studied the classics, and Latin was the language of the classroom. Both John and Charles continued their education at Oxford where they studied the Bible and classic literature in Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

John noticed a low standard of morality at Oxford and he felt it reflected the same low standard in the church in general. He began to realize that his father had set a strict standard for the family as a stand against this low morality. His father had suffered over the years, because, as a preacher at Epworth, he was never afraid to speak out against sin. Most people believed that the fire which burned down their house was set intentionally by angry parishioners.

Before graduating, John Wesley struggled with the idea of becoming a minister. Was this what God was calling him to do? In coming to his decision he realized that he had a definite desire to serve God. He was ordained in 1725. He soon saw that his genuine zeal to serve God was not matched by others. Most of the clergy in the church did not care to correct the low moral standard prevailing among the people.

John began to search for the way to be holy and have a proper living for God. He read books on holy living such as The Imitation of Christ. One such book said that piety required much self-exam. He then began routine self-exams in his journal. About the same time John's brother

Charles started a holiness club. Those seeking a righteous living met together for prayer, self-exam and fellowship. John began attending regularly. The club soon began activities to practically express a righteous living. They helped meet the needs of the poor and they visited those in prison. They also raised money to get people out of debtors' prison. Through the books he read and the people he met, John concluded and told Charles that their decision to seek a holy life was correct.

Those in the holiness clubs intended to bring salvation to the prisoners they visited, but John soon learned that he and the others had a kind of impediment. The prisoners, though polite, looked at them very strangely when they preached. Finally when he asked a prisoner about it, he said it was only because they didn't know what he was saying. They only caught a word here and there. It seemed the lofty speech of the clerics was unintelligible to the unschooled. Later, when John began preaching outdoors, he instructed those laboring with him how to speak in plain English

Though John was earnestly seeking holiness, he felt the "inward witness" was missing. When John and Charles were sent to America with two other Oxford men, John realized this clearly. On the ship John observed the Moravians, followers of the Gennan reformer Zinzendorf. He noted their seriousness and humility. During a strong storm they expressed, "a faith so strong that death held no terror." During the same storm John was ashamed and troubled at his lack of faith and unwillingness to die. When the ship reached America (Georgia), John asked the leader of the Moravians about his peace in the face of death. The brother preached the gospel to John saying, "Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God," and then, "Do you know Jesus Christ?"

After two years in America, John realized he was not saved. He began preaching in London but he offended many by his strong preaching on spiritual perfection. Meanwhile, he continued questioning the Moravians about their strong faith and inner peace. It seemed he wanted to figure it out. They told him that his philosophy needed to be purged out and that the peace of God transcends understanding. They encouraged him to preach faith until he had it. John's continual seeking finally resulted in a spiritual awakening during a small meeting. A Moravian brother named William Holland was preaching from Romans. When he described the change God works in one's heart through faith, John began to consider his heart as the inner place where the Spirit must dwell. He stood up and testified that just that night he had the witness of the Spirit within. Afterwards he said he felt reborn. Only three days earlier Charles had had a similar experience after the same brother, William Holland, had visited him and preached to him from Galatians.

Around that time George Whitefield, whom the Wesleys had nurtured in their holiness club at Oxford, had begun preaching outdoors in and around the growing cities of the early industrial revolution. The farmers and laborers there were "unchurched" and he felt they must be reached. After Whitefield invited John to join him, John tried field preaching. "Field preaching makes my skin crawl," he admitted, but in a day he had reached seven thousand five hundred people. He had no doubt that it fulfilled the great commission to preach the gospel and that the Sermon on the Mount was field preaching.

John and his brother Charles started new societies like the former holiness clubs, but these were

made up of laborers and farmers as well as the well educated. In these meetings they sang spirited hymns, unlike the dull chanting in the church services. John translated hymns and Charles began writing hymns. Some of the laymen attending these meetings began to preach in the field. At first John was troubled that those not ordained were preaching, but through his mother's words and his own experience, he realized these men were called by God to preach.

Preaching outdoors in those days was very challenging. Travel was hard, on horseback or on foot. Once they arrived they were not always welcomed warmly by the crowds of the poorer classes. There was opposition, which grew very physical at times. As mobs attacked John time and time again, he calmly confronted them. On one occasion he was swung at with a club, had his clothes torn, his hand scraped raw and hair yanked. Blood was oozing from his mouth by the time he was rescued by the mayor. After it all, he was overjoyed that he had been without fear throughout.

Charles and John Wesley's strict, scheduled upbringing had trained them to be strict, scheduled people. Therefore their time was used by the Lord to the fullest extent. During one week in April, for example, John preached fifteen times in thirteen places. When he was sick, he was not idle, but worked on books. He wrote much throughout his life and his writings were a help to many. In his *Notes upon the Old Testament* the preface explains how to read the Scripture. One point says, "Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used, before we consult the oracles of God, seeing 'scripture can only be understood thro' the same Spirit whereby it was given.' Our reading should likewise be closed with prayer, that what we read may be written on our hearts." Charles wrote hymns while riding on horseback. Many of his hymns are still sung today and continue to touch many hearts. Some include, "And Can It Be That I Should Gain?" (Hymns #296), "Arise My Soul Arise" (Hymns #300) and "Jesus Lover of My Soul" (Hymns #1057).

As John neared death, he marveled that God had placed his societies in areas which had become booming centers of the industrial revolution. By his following the Lord to preach to common people in the countryside many received the Lord. It was written that England might even have been spared a revolution like that of France at that time because John Wesley was tending to the masses.

APPLICATION:

1. John Wesley realized early that sin offends God and would hinder one from pleasing God. We should also have such an intense desire to live a life that is righteous and moral before God—a life that will make the Lord happy
2. By keeping away from sin and living a holy life, John Wesley became an effective preacher and witness for the Lord Jesus. As for Charles Wesley, his experience of the Lord filled his heart with godly adoration and lofty praise for God so that he turned out hundreds of hymns that have become favorites of many Christians even today. We should learn to live a life like them so that we can be as useful to the Lord and serve the Lord as they did.

Prepared for young people, by the church in New York