

JOHN WESLEY

A house ablaze

It was February 1709; it was a cold winter's night in the small, sleepy town of Epworth, Lincolnshire, England. Suddenly, the dark night sky was lit up by the red glare of fire. The roof of the parsonage was ablaze. The minister, Samuel Wesley, frantically woke his family. The flames, blown by a strong wind, raced rapidly through the building. A nurse picked up Charles, who was 14-months-old, and quickly carried him to safety. With some difficulty the girls made their way down the stairs; some of them had



to climb out through a window to escape. A crowd gathered immediately, and Samuel made his way among them, anxiously searching for his children and rejoicing when he found them safe. Suddenly a cry was heard from an upstairs window. It was John, the Wesleys' five-year-old son, and he was surrounded by flames. His rescue seemed impossible, and Samuel solemnly knelt down and commended the soul of his child to God. But then, in one final effort to save the boy, a rescuer climbed on to the shoulders of another man and formed a human ladder. The man highest up grabbed the little boy and lowered him safely to the ground. The next moment the roof fell in. The flames consumed the spot where John had been standing only seconds earlier. John never forgot the event and throughout his life he frequently referred to himself as "a brand snatched out of the burning." Though no one knew it at the time, that rescued five-year-old boy, who had been born on June 28, 1703, would grow up to live what has been called "the most celebrated and productive life in the whole of 18th century England."

Because of the fire and the destruction of the home, the Wesley family was split up, living in various places while the house was being rebuilt. At the end of the year, although the rebuilding was not entirely finished, the family returned. It was soon evident that the children had picked up manners they

had not known before. Mrs. Wesley (Susanna) acted without delay to deal with the situation. She had the children come to her, one at a time, in the evenings, for instruction in the Scriptures and in righteous living. This was no easy task since John's mother gave birth to 19 children in 20 years. John had a life-long respect for his mother. At the age of six or seven he apparently said that he would never marry "because I could never find such a woman as my father had."

Like all the Wesley children, John's busy day began well before dawn. He was expected to read from the Bible, say the Lord's Prayer, recite Bible verses, say a prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, and pray for his family members. Once all that was done, he could go to family devotions.

John entered Oxford University in 1720 at the age of 17. Though John was serious about his studies, he was not, at this time, very serious about his soul. It was his brother Charles who began what was called "The Holy Club" – a group of young men who met to pray and read the scriptures. Later, John's attitude changed. He made a tremendous effort to live a holy life and eventually was ordained a minister of the Anglican Church. He and Charles began a lifelong practice of conversing with each other in Latin; every night they met for consultation before supper; they relieved the poor, and looked after the clothing and training of school children; they daily visited the prisoners in the castle, read prayers there on Wednesdays and Fridays, preached there on Sundays, and administered the communion once a month. "He rose at four to cure himself of lying awake at night. At five, morning and evening, he spent an hour in private prayer. His diary and accounts were kept with constant precision." However, despite these religious pursuits, neither he nor Charles was yet saved. John wrote, *"What I now hoped to be saved by was (1) not being so bad as other people; (2) having still a kindness for religion; and (3) reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers ... I watched against all sin, whether in word or deed. I began to aim at, and pray for, inward holiness. So that now, 'doing so much, and living so good a life,' I doubted not but I was a good Christian."*

In the hopes of improving his spiritual condition, John went to Georgia as a missionary to the "Indians." During a storm at sea, while he feared for his life, he was stunned by the calm and serenity with which some Moravian passengers faced the danger. After reaching Georgia, John had a conversation with a Moravian preacher who asked him, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" John answered, "I know He is the Savior of the world." "True," the Moravian responded, "but do you know he has saved you?" John, of course, had no assurance of that. Not knowing Christ or the Gospel of God's grace, John's missionary endeavor was a spectacular failure and he set out for home. On the trip back to England he wrote in his journal, ***"It is upwards two years since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity, but what have I learned? Why, what I least of all suspected, that I, who went to America to convert others, was never converted myself..."***

A heart "strangely warmed"

John kept in touch with some of the Moravians he had met on his trip to America. In conversation with some of them, he began to understand his need of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. However, he wrote, *"I knew not that I was wholly void of this faith; but only thought I had not enough of it."* As he read the scriptures he became increasingly aware of his lost condition and his need for *"a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for me; a trust in Him, as my Christ, as my sole justification, sanctification, and redemption."* Here, in his own words, is the description of the day in 1738 when he was saved: It was *"Wednesday, May 24. I think it was about five this morning that I opened my Testament on those words, 'There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that you should be partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4). Just as I went out, I opened it again on those words, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was*

reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, 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 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." Later he wrote, "It pleased God to kindle a fire which I trust shall never be extinguished."

A preacher on fire

"Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to watch you burn."

When God saved John Wesley, England was in a moral quagmire. Thomas Carlyle described the country's condition as "Stomach well alive, soul extinct." Deism was rampant. A bland, philosophical morality was standard fare in the churches. Sir William Blackstone visited the church of every major clergyman in London, but "did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero." Morally, the country was becoming increasingly decadent. Drunkenness was rampant; gambling was so extensive that one historian described England as "one vast casino." Newborns were exposed in the streets; 97% of the infant poor in the workhouses died as children. Tickets were sold to public executions as to a theater. The slave trade was booming. Morality and religion in Britain had collapsed "to a degree that was never known in any Christian country."

Then God worked. He saved and called into His service George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley and

others. They evangelized the length and breadth of the British Isles. (The picture on the right shows Wesley preaching to thousands at Gwennap Pit). It seems clear that England was spared the raging fires of the French Revolution because of the sublime Gospel fires lit by these men and others. John Wesley was the most traveled individual of his own day, covering the equivalent of 10 times around the world (mostly on horseback), preaching forty thousand sermons. He acted



"as though he were out of breath in pursuit of souls." Wherever he preached and the Gospel message was received, lives changed and manners and morals altered for the better.

For 50 years he labored for Christ. Possessing extraordinary energy and enthusiasm, Wesley often preached 15 sermons a week. When he was 72 he wrote:

Tuesday, June 28, 1774: "This being my birthday, the first day of my 72nd year, I was considering, How is this, that I find just the same strength as I did 30 years ago? That my sight is considerably better now, and my nerves firmer, than they were then? That I have none of the infirmities of old age, and have lost several I had in my youth? The grand cause is, the good pleasure of God, Who doeth whatsoever pleaseth Him. The chief means are 1. My constantly rising at four, for about 50 years. 2. My generally preaching at five in the morning; one of the most healthy exercises in the world. 3. My never traveling less than 4500 miles in a year."

Well into his 80s, he wrote:

Friday, January 1, 1790: *"I am now an old man, decayed from head to foot. My eyes are dim; my right hand shakes much, my mouth is hot and dry every morning; I have a lingering fever almost every day; my motion is weak and slow. However, **blessed be God, I do not slack my labor; I can preach and write still.**"*

Thursday, October 7, 1790: *"I went over to that poor skeleton of ancient Winchelsea ... I stood under a large tree, on the side of it, and called to most of the inhabitants of the town: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand; repent, and believe the gospel.'"*

Sunday, October 24, 1790: *"I explained to a numerous congregation in Spitalfields church, 'the whole armor of God.' St. Paul's, Shadwell, was still more crowded in the afternoon, while I enforced that important truth: 'One thing is needful'; and I hope many, even then, resolved to choose the better part."*



He died at 88, on March 2, 1791, preaching, writing, and working right up to the moment he was called home to Heaven. As he lay dying, his friends gathered around him. He grasped their hands and said repeatedly, "Farewell, farewell." At the end, summoning all his remaining strength, he cried out, "The best of all is, God is with us." Then he lifted his arms, raised his feeble voice again, and said once more:

"The best of all is, God is with us."

