

BY JENNA DEWITT

WHO IS

JOHN WESLEY

"Lord, let me not live to be useless," reads the tombstone of John Wesley. A humble prayer for a man who dedicated his life to leading a spiritual revival that echoes to this day.

John Wesley was born in 1703, the 14th child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Nearly the only issue the couple agreed upon was an intense devotion to Christ and the Church, thus John was raised with a strict, but rich theological education. After miraculously surviving a house fire at 5 years old, he earned his spiritually symbolic as well as literal nickname: "a brand plucked from the burning."

Though highly logical, disciplined, studious and religious with a sincere devotion to the service of God, it took him much longer to truly grasp faith.

John and his brother, Charles, attended Oxford and led a "Holy Club" that became known as the "Methodists" for their methodical practice of spiritual disciplines and accountability. Their intensely devoted lifestyle was a natural extension of their pursuit of godliness, but to an academic community and Church more concerned with patronage and politics than holiness, these "Methodists" were seen as odd, even radicals.

John still felt something missing in his spiritual life, however. In hopes of discovering the assurance of grace he longed for, he and Charles set out as missionaries to the Native Americans in Georgia. The Native Americans refused to hear the Wesleys' message. Instead, the colonists appointed the brothers to church positions where they served in ministry, but with little success. Charles left first, homesick for England and frustrated with the colonists. When John's pride and strict religious methods di-

sastrously combined with his broken heart over unrequited love, he followed Charles home to England, driven out by his enemies.

He then dove into Moravian theology, having witnessed German Moravians in complete peace during a violent storm at sea. Their quiet courage in the face of death contrasted against John's fear, emphasizing his lack of confidence in his salvation. Though several conversations and books had led him to a fuller understanding of "salvation by grace through faith," he had yet to experience it for himself.

In May 1738, John received his sign. He was invited to a small group Bible study on Aldersgate Street in London. According to his published "Journals," one of the members read 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 salvation; and an assurance was given to me that He had taken away my sins, even mine."

With this revelation of grace, he and Charles – who had also recently experienced his own spiritual awakening – began to organize their connections into a network of "societies." These were small groups scattered around England, led by their fellow Holy Club alumni and other clergy friends. Though the Wesleys had no intention of splitting with the Church of England, their gatherings around the country were gaining in popularity and increasingly experiencing miracles, unbelievers coming to faith and strong evidence of the Holy Spirit moving amongst them. With no formal appointment to a local church confining him, John viewed

the "world as his parish," and set about traveling, preaching, writing and shepherding these small groups.

Every year for 40 years, John rode on horseback about 8,000 miles, preaching several times a day in fields, homes, small churches and wherever he was welcome (and many places he was not). As Roy Hattersley wrote, "There is hardly a marketplace or village green in England which does not now boast that John Wesley once preached within its boundaries." He preached while rioters threw mud or rocks and yelled insults against him. He drew the lost with his gentleness, called sinners to holiness, ignited the hearts of the hopeless and challenged the dead rituals of the established Church of his day.

At his death in 1791, he left behind little of material value, having given everything away, but his spiritual legacy continues to impact eternity.



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