

A Brand Plucked From the Fire

by David Mook

John Wesley's life was a journey of spiritual transformation, from seeking salvation through good works to finding it through simple faith in Jesus Christ.

Duration: 48:08

Scripture: Zechariah 3:4, Romans 8:7, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Faith Alone", "Salvation History"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the life of John Wesley, a prominent figure in English Christianity. The sermon begins by recounting a significant event from Wesley's childhood where he was rescued from a burning house, which he later recognized as a symbol of God's intervention in his life. The preacher then highlights Wesley's realization that salvation is not achieved through works or methods, but through faith in the blood of Christ. The sermon briefly touches on Wesley's childhood training in the Word of God and acknowledges the challenge of summarizing such a rich and lengthy life in a single message.

Transcript

On February 9th, 1709, between 11 p.m. and midnight, a fire broke out in the home of Samuel and Susanna Wesley in Epworth, England. All of the family members were in their beds. The Reverend Samuel Wesley thought he heard someone shouting, fire in the street, but he did not realize that his home was the one burning.

His little daughter, Hetty, raised the alarm first, for some of the burning embers fell through the thatched roof onto her bed. Mr. Wesley quickly roused his family, those to whom he could get, and urged them to flee the house immediately. They did not even have time to get dressed.

They ran out in their nightclothes out into the winter air. Already the thatched roof on the house was in danger of falling into the house. The family members found different escape routes out of the house.

Mrs. Wesley, on the third attempt, ran through the flames and was scorched on her face and her legs. Finally, all of the family members and the servants were safely outside except for the five-and-a-half-year-old son, John, who was asleep in the nursery. The other children and their nurse awakened at the alarm and ran quickly out of the house.

But no one realized that John had not awakened and that he remained in his bed. Soon he awoke and he sensed outside the bed curtains that there was light in the room. And he looked out from the curtains and saw streaks of flame going across the ceiling.

So he jumped out of the bed and ran to the door to the room and opened it to the hall, but saw there a wall of fire. So he ran over to the window and he climbed on top of a chest of drawers. And then it was that his father down below in the street saw him at the window and resolved that he would try to re-enter the house to rescue his son.

By that time, the house was almost completely engulfed in flames. Twice, Mr. Wesley tried to get to the stairs leading to the upper story, but he could not get through the flames. And so he concluded that John was about to perish in the fire.

So he gathered his family together in the garden and they committed their little boy into the hands of the Lord. Another man thought that maybe they should go and get a ladder and by that way they could rescue the boy, but another man said there is no time for that. He suggested that they should get the tallest man they had and have a lighter man climb onto his shoulders and reach up to the window and that way they could reach the boy.

Well, the first attempt they made, and remember all of this was going on as the house was blazing, the first attempt they made failed when the man who was climbing up onto the shoulders of the other man fell off onto the ground. But they attempted again and this time they were able to reach the window and they pulled the little boy out of the window just as the roof caved in on the rest of the house. The rescuers brought the little boy to his father who explained, come neighbors, let us kneel down.

Let us give thanks to God. He has given me all my eight children. Let the house go.

I am rich enough. Within 15 minutes everything was reduced to ashes. All the furniture, all the books, all of Mr. Wesley's papers were lost.

The little boy was old enough at the time to realize how much he owed his life to the intervention of God and he was ever grateful for that rescue. 41 years later he wrote in his journal about a service, a late night service he had conducted just that evening. He said, about 11 o'clock it came into my mind that this was the very day and hour in which 40 years ago I was taken out of the flames.

I stopped and gave a short account of that wonderful providence. The voice of praise and thanksgiving went up on high and great was our rejoicing before the Lord. The incident would become a symbol of the intervention of the Lord in the life of his soul.

For after laboring for years to make himself a Christian, Wesley came to recognize that salvation was not a matter of following the right method or doing the right works. It was a matter of simple faith in Jesus Christ. And so the reality came to pass to which John Wesley had referred in providing a title for a drawing that he had made of the famous fire that had destroyed his first childhood home.

Under that drawing he wrote the question which is our text this evening, is not this a brand plucked out of the fire? Well that was certainly true of him physically, but it came to be true of him spiritually. For after spending 35 years of his life trying to make himself religious, trying to make himself a Christian, there came about the famous scene in a religious society meeting in Aldersgate Street in London on the evening of Wednesday, May 24, 1738. He went, he said, unwillingly to the meeting.

He had spent a long day already in attending other meetings. The man in charge of the meeting was reading Luther's preface to the Romans. Wesley wrote 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 warm.

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. His brother Charles recorded the event in his own journal.

Towards ten, my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of our friends and declared, I believe. We sang the hymn with great joy and parted with prayer. The hymn to which he referred was one that he had written only the day before.

And together the brothers, now both full of faith in Christ, sang, O how shall I the goodness tell, Father, which thou to me hast shown, that I, a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God, should know, should feel my sins forgiven, blessed with this antipast of heaven. When Wesley was challenged about the way in which he had claimed for many years to be a Christian and had even preached and conducted a ministry, he replied by saying, When we renounce everything but faith and get into Christ, then and not till then have we any reason to believe that we are Christians. So it came to pass that the experience that he remembered from his childhood became true in his experience as an adult.

John Wesley was truly a brand plucked from the fire. Now, to try in a single message to convey the sweep of the life of one of the giants of English Christianity is a goal that is doomed to failure almost from the outset. There is no way this evening that I can acquaint you with anything like a thorough survey of this life that lasted nearly 88 years, nearly an eternity in the turbulent period of the 18th century in England, when life expectancy generally was very brief.

My desire this evening is merely to call attention to this great truth, that John Wesley was a product of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. There are points on which I would differ strongly with ideas that were maintained and proclaimed by Wesley during his life. In fact, as he drew near the end of his life, even he admitted that his views on Christian perfectionism, that is, by following the method he devised, hence Methodism, by following the method he devised, it was possible for a believer to arrive at perfection.

But two days before his death, Wesley said in a low but clear voice, Wesley knew full well that salvation is not a matter of works, but of God's grace. Not a matter of human effort, but of Christ's redemption. Not a matter of some man-made righteousness, but of the regeneration accomplished by the sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit.

As I have said, John Wesley was born by the old calendar on June 17, 1703, in the small town of Epworth, a town of just a few hundred souls, in the northwest part of Lincolnshire, in England, about 200 miles from London. His father was an Anglican minister, and his mother was a devout woman, who was certainly faithful to the light she had, even though at that time she did not know herself the full blessing of the gospel of Christ. When John Wesley was born in 1703, the very year in which Jonathan Edwards was born in New England, when John Wesley was born, the great heritage of the Protestant Reformation, and of the Puritan movement in England of the 17th century, had been very nearly extinguished.

Just 15 years before Wesley's birth in 1688, the glorious revolution had succeeded in finally ridding the country of the Roman Catholic royal family of the Stuarts, and had established William and Mary as the Protestant sovereigns. So that happened just 15 years before Wesley was born. The sad state of the land

religiously could be seen in the fact that in 1703, most people were taught and believed that if they were good, kind, and honest, did their duty to their neighbors, and perhaps also said their prayers and went to church, that they would go to heaven when they died.

The godly ministers of the time of the Westminster Assembly that had convened just 60 years before Wesley's birth had all died off, or had been hounded by the Stuart kings out of the country. There had been, in the 17th century, great judgments from the hand of God in England. There had been yet another appearance of the great plague, the bubonic plague, the Black Death, a disease that was not understood.

A disease, it was thought, that was spread in the air. And there was also the thing that really probably solved to cure the Black Death in London, and that was the great fire of 1666 that practically obliterated the entire city. The ministers who were active in England at the time of Wesley's birth then knew very little of the gospel.

They did not understand or believe that it is the blood of Christ and not our own doings that makes people fit for heaven. Now this evening I want to divide Wesley's life into five sections, and then to conclude with some observations, and a look at one of the most thrilling deathbed scenes in all of Christian history. Let's consider first of all his childhood.

Wesley's boyhood was marked by a careful training in the word of God. He was the fifteenth of nineteen children born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. But by the time of his birth, nine, nine of his older siblings were already dead.

That was not an uncommon situation for half of a couple's children to die during childhood. It's why people had such large families, because the chances were great that one or more of the children would die before reaching adulthood. There were so many diseases for which there was really no treatment or remedy.

Even when he was a boy, Wesley and several of his siblings contracted smallpox, a dread disease, a disease that killed thousands each year in England. They survived by God's mercy. Wesley's mother was a firm believer in discipline.

And she taught him to read, not by giving him a primer on reading, but by handing him the Bible and teaching him to read beginning at the first chapter of the Bible. As soon as he was able to speak, before he was two years old, his oldest sister began to read to him each afternoon a psalm and a chapter from the New Testament. One of Wesley's sisters was able to read Greek when she was seven, and no doubt John's training was very similar.

It was said of the life in the home that they wanted the children very early on to learn what it was to sit quietly at meals. And so as soon as it was practical, they brought a little table and little chairs into the family's dining room, and there the children were taught to sit. And when they wanted something, to request it very quietly and politely.

When John was eleven, he was sent away from home to go to school in the city of London, more than two hundred miles away. He spent six years there, and from there he entered Christ Church College at Oxford University. And that brings us to the second phase of his life, university.

When he was at Oxford, he displayed not only a great talent for his studies, but also he began to be troubled seriously about his sins. Now, contrary to most stereotypes of Wesley, he was not of a gloomy disposition. Many people regarded him after his life as a very austere man, a very stern man.

But he could testify as an old man that he had never been in low spirits for very long in his whole life. But, as he himself would point out, happiness and high spirits are not necessarily the same thing. High spirits depend upon health and other circumstances, and do not necessarily indicate that there is peace in the heart.

On the other hand, happiness does not depend on what we are, or what we have, but on what we know God to be. And therefore, if all changes with us, whether we lose our health, or our friends, or whatever happens, that which makes us truly happy does not change. For our happiness is in God.

And if you turn to Psalm 144, you find that stated very plainly. Psalm 144. Look at the end of the psalm, verse 15.

Happy is that people that is in such a case. Yea, happy is that people whose God is the Lord. That is where our happiness comes.

At Oxford, John Wesley, the student, looked into his own soul, and what he saw grieved him. He was not happy, because he sensed that God was not pleased with him. And he sought, for some way, in which to remove that sense.

In which to know that God would be happy with him. So, he asked his mother what he should do. His mother directed him to religion.

So John Wesley tried to gain peace in his heart, and salvation by religious works. But he found out, very sadly, that religion is not Christ. So he asked his father, the Anglican minister, what he should do.

And his father's counsel was to read a book written by Thomas Akempas, called The Imitation of Christ. And he did read it, and he admired it very much. And there was much influence from that book on the methods that he developed.

The first three sections of the book give instruction about how we are to make ourselves pleasing to God by our good works. That is, by our imitation of the works of Jesus. The last section of the book deals with the mystery of the Roman Mass.

And gives instruction as to how to adore and reverence the literal body and blood of Christ in the Mass. It was very tragic that this book was recommended to Wesley, because this book was to prevent Wesley, for many years, from coming to learn the truth of the Gospel. For it is entirely contrary to the Gospel.

What did he need to hear? He needed to hear words such as those we find in Romans chapter 8. Romans chapter 8 and verse 7. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God. For it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then, they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Now, that is what Wesley needed to hear. That we are not to bring righteousness to God, that He may be satisfied with it, but that we need to receive righteousness from God. And to own that, that with which God is satisfied, is the perfect work of Christ.

Ultimately, John Wesley became a graduate fellow at Lincoln College at the University. And there, he set about implementing his own thoughts about religion. And that ushered in, really, the third phase of his life, which we call the Holy Club.

In 1729, with his younger brother Charles and some other men, he formed what was called, generally, the Holy Club. This was a club made up of students at the University who pledged themselves, in the interest of reforming their lives, to abide by certain rules that they reckoned would make themselves pleasing to God. It was really the founding of what came to be known as Methodism.

That there was a method by which to achieve holiness. One of the other members of that club was a younger man, about seven years younger than Wesley, and his name was George Whitfield. Now, Whitfield was studying the Bible on his own.

And by his study of the Bible, he came to know the truth of the Gospel. But John Wesley, and his brother, and others, did not come to that knowledge. And so they continued on following their methods, by which they hoped to make themselves Christians.

Now, the fourth phase of his life, we may call the New World. Because, in 1735, John Wesley and his brother sailed across the ocean with a man named James Oglethorpe, who had been given the royal charter for a new colony to be settled along the coast of what is now Georgia. Now, while they were traveling across the ocean, they were in the company of some Moravians, who were descendants of people who had followed John Hus, back in the 15th century.

These Moravians had about them an atmosphere of quiet godliness and humble sincerity in following the way of Christ. And he noticed it especially when they encountered a storm at sea. And when they encountered that storm at sea, and it was a very violent storm, he himself was terrified.

But he looked on them and saw that whether it was a storm or a sunny day, that they carried about their lives as though nothing had changed. And he couldn't understand that. But he knew that there was something there in their experience he did not know.

They arrived in Georgia and labored there among the new settlers and among the Indians, but without really any success. His aim in going was to convert the Indians. The settlers who were there were rather godless, and they did not appreciate much of what Wesley told them.

They sought to apply their methods, their rules of the holy club, to the religious life of the colony of Georgia. And the colonists resented this intrusion. And eventually, Wesley sailed home in failure and disgrace.

In fact, he sailed home to get away from charges that were brought against him. And that would have resulted probably in his being imprisoned. It was not long after Wesley left Georgia that George Whitefield arrived there.

And when George Whitefield arrived there, everything changed. He began to preach the gospel of Christ with great power. And sinners began to be converted unto Christ, so that the very thing that John Wesley had sought was accomplished in a far different way.

Back home in England, Wesley was continuing to seek the peace he knew he lacked. His brother Charles went through a period of illness. In fact, it was thought that Charles was going to die.

And through that period, Charles came to know the truth of the gospel and rejoiced in the confidence that his sins were forgiven. John thought that Charles was very presumptuous and thought that he had seriously departed from the faith because he had abandoned their methods for achieving holiness. But

John had written in his own journal about his misery.

He said, I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who shall convert me? Who and what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I can talk well, nay, and believe myself while no danger is near, but let death look me in the face and my spirit is troubled. Oh, who will deliver me from this fear of death? What shall I do? Where shall I fly from it? It was just five days after Charles was converted that John went to that meeting in Aldersgate Street of which I spoke earlier. Wesley went there unwillingly because he had always considered Luther to be wrong because he thought Luther made too much of faith in salvation instead of emphasizing the role of works with faith.

But that night, Wesley came to know Christ Himself. He came to rest in Him completely, and from that day forward he was a happy and contented man. And so that leads us to the fifth phase of his life, his ministry, which continued from that day for more than fifty years.

He was a preacher of the gospel of Christ. Now at first, Wesley preached in small private meetings because the churches, the Anglican churches in which formerly he had been welcomed, would not welcome him if he was going to preach what they considered to be sensationalism, if he was going to preach the gospel. Whitefield was also barred from many of those churches.

So at the example of Whitefield, Wesley took to preaching in the open air. He became really one of the greatest field preachers that England has ever seen. He marveled at the thousands of people who came to hear him glorify the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

There was in Wesley's ministry in England a great awakening akin to that of which was spoken in New England in the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. And in a land where sin was the order of the day and wickedness abounded on every hand, people in great numbers began to come to Christ and it was thought that it was the only thing that saved England from disaster. Wesley spoke about the coal miners and the coal haulers, the colliers as they were called, whose blackened faces were marked by streaks of white as their tears flowed when they were told of Christ's compassion for them and of His atoning sacrifice in their behalf.

Frequently during his ministry he confronted the angry reaction of those who hated his message, who wanted to be left to earn their way to heaven, to follow the methods. Wesley was physically attacked. His house was attacked.

And on more than one occasion he faced angry mobs who were determined that he should not preach the gospel in their area. But he could not be dissuaded. He remained faithful to his calling.

He traveled largely by horse. And by horseback or by foot he traveled in his life thousands of miles. He traversed the snowy moors or the muddy roads of England.

Sometimes he was absent from home for nine months at a time. Finally, on March 2, 1791, he died. Three years after the death of his brother Charles.

I want to say a little bit more about his death in just a few moments. But let me just offer a few observations about his life. I think we have to see that in his life there was a demonstration of the power of the sovereign grace of God.

He had endured a painful experience in Georgia. He had been in love with a young woman in Georgia. And that relationship fell apart and that young woman married another man and began to be very ungodly in her behavior.

And he had to come at one point to refuse her admission to the communion table. And that is what occasioned the legal action eventually that came against him. So he had tried to implement his man-made religion in Georgia and had seen it be a miserable failure.

And the events that transpired once he got back to England made him more aware than ever that salvation is of the Lord. That if the Lord does not move, people will not be saved. And even with all of the theological ideas that he developed, he never moved away from that truth.

Now, I think we also must say that his doctrine was reflective of Arminian influences. He was not an Arminian in the historic sense of the word, but there were some ideas that he propounded that were Arminian. For one thing, he taught that people could lose their salvation.

And he also taught the possibility of salvation for all. And in connection with that, he taught perfectionism. So that in his period of time, there was a division, definitely, between Whitfield and Hoplady, the writer of Rock of Ages, and others who were followers of the system of theology that was codified by Calvin.

There were those on one side, and there were those on the other side that we would call today Wesleyan Methodists. There are distinctions that have to be made in Methodism today. Wesleyan Methodists are those who follow the system, the doctrines that Wesley taught.

But as I have said, even Wesley admitted toward the end of his life that some of his ideas had caused great harm. He regretted that. But we have to say about Wesley that his efforts to preach the gospel were remarkable for their devotion to Christ.

He was a preacher of Christ. He was not a preacher of a system. He was a preacher of Christ.

And if you read his journal, and if you read his other writings, you will be impressed by that. That here was a man who understood what the cross of Christ was all about. Some people wonder, was he ever married? He was married.

He got married when he was in his forties. But it was not a happy marriage. His wife was not really, as it turned out, in sympathy with his life's work.

With his ministry. And as I have said, he was gone from home a great deal of the time. And that certainly didn't help things.

But she had no real sympathy with what he was trying to do. And that's an exhortation to all to be careful that they marry those who are going to be in sympathy with what they are called to do in the Lord's service. So his marriage was a constant source of trial to him.

And probably to his wife as well. But when he came to die, his death left a shining testimony of peace and trust. There is a biography that I picked up just this last week from Ambassador, a biography written early in the 20th century by a man named John Telford about John Wesley.

It's called Into All the World. And it's a very well-written biography and certainly very encouraging. But there is a very striking description of the last days of his life, really.

The last day, I would say. He had been in great weakness. I've had the privilege to be in the very room where John Wesley died to look on the very bed in which he died in London.

He had been in great weakness. And in the afternoon of one of the last days of his life, he wanted to get up. While his clothes were being brought to him, he broke out singing with such vigor that all his friends were astonished.

These words, I'll praise my Maker while I've breath. And when my voice is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler powers. My days of praise shall ne'er be past, while life and thought and being last, or immortality endures.

Happy the man whose hopes rely on Israel's God. He made the sky and earth and seas with all their train. His truth forever stands secure.

He saves the oppressed. He feeds the poor. And none shall find his promise vain.

When he was helped into a chair, he said in a very weak voice, Lord, Thou givest strength to those that can speak and to those that cannot. Speak, Lord, to all our hearts, and let them know that Thou loosest tongue. And then as he was bidding farewell to people who came to see him there in that room, he took leave of them all.

And finding that his friends could not understand what he said, he paused, and with all his remaining strength cried out, The best of all is, God is with us. Then lifting up his dying arm in token of victory, and raising his feeble voice with a holy triumph not to be expressed, he again repeated the heart-reviving words, The best of all is, God is with us. And so, just not long after that time, John Wesley passed into the presence of his Savior and his Redeemer.

A brand plucked from the fire. Who did the plucking? It was God himself who rescued Wesley. God dealt with him in a way that he does not choose to deal with others.

He left Wesley to his own devices for years, that he might learn well the folly of man-made religion. That he might learn well the truth that only Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the means by which we are brought to salvation. Certainly when we think of that tonight, we can think of ourselves in that same light.

I trust we do. That we are brands plucked from the fire. We were on our way to hell.

We were going down to disaster. We were doomed. And then God intervened.

God intervened, and by the power of his sovereign grace and mercy, through the sacrifice of Christ, rescued us from our sin and misery. Oh, that we would always look upon our own experience in that way. Is not this a brand? Plucked from the fire.

It's interesting in that passage in Zechariah that we read, that there is talk about taking away the filthy garments from him. In verse 4, the Lord said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. What are those filthy garments but our own works, our own efforts? It is the grace of God that enables us to see those filthy garments stripped off us and to be clothed with the garments of Christ's righteousness.

That is what Wesley came to know. There were some aspects of Wesley's life that were controversial. I really don't have time to go into those this evening, because I want you to leave with this thought, that here

was a man who came to know the truth of the gospel.

And whatever his views were on certain matters, certainly he did preach the gospel and sought to see sinners converted through the gospel. He did a work in England, the like of which has not been seen since. Certainly, we may admire his devotion, but we may admire even more his Redeemer.

So then, let us take note ourselves that we have been plucked from the fire and so be found faithful in our own calling to the service of our Redeemer.

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