

Death of George Whitefield

by E.A. Johnston

The sermon commemorates the life and death of George Whitefield, highlighting his unwavering dedication to preaching the gospel until his last breath.

Duration: 12:01

Scripture: Psalm 39:4, Psalm 90:12, Proverbs 27:1, Matthew 5:16, Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 9:24, 2 Corinthians 13:5

Topics: "Biography"

Description

In the sermon transcripts, it is described how George Whitfield, a preacher of the word of God, was approached by a crowd at the home of Parsons, asking him to give them a final message before retiring. Whitfield agrees to preach until a candle burns out, symbolizing his dedication to spreading the gospel of Christ. Despite his physical ailments, including asthma and possibly emphysema, Whitfield pours his heart out to the crowd from a staircase landing, presenting his master Emmanuel. Another instance is mentioned where Whitfield, despite feeling poor and desiring rest, agrees to preach to a large crowd in Exeter. Despite his worsening asthma, he continues to prioritize preaching and even expresses concern about his ability to fulfill future preaching engagements.

Transcript

On this day, September 30th, in 1770, the great George Whitefield died, in the town of New Barryport, Massachusetts, in the home of his dear friend, Jonathan Parsons. Whitefield died around 6 a.m. Today is the anniversary of his death, 242 years ago. I would like to commemorate his death by reading some extracts from my two-volume definitive biography on Whitefield, published by Revival Literature.

I begin in the chapter entitled, The Death of Whitefield. It was noon when a worn-out Whitefield rode into Exeter and was met by his good friend Parsons. His asthma had wreaked havoc on his body, and at the age of 55, he looked and felt like an old man.

After preaching, he would often vomit and spit up blood and be so weak as to require assistance as he dismounted his field pulpit. On September 29th, 1770, his chest was heaving and he felt particularly poor and desired to go to bed, but this was not to be the case this afternoon. Upon his arrival at the town of Exeter, word got out quickly that Whitefield had arrived, and soon an immense crowd had gathered, desirous of him to preach to them.

Always willing to put Christ first and neglect the needs of his body, he agreed to preach to the masses in the field. An outdoor platform had been quickly constructed, and a crowd had gathered anticipating his arrival, and as he approached the field, his steps were slow and laborious. Mr. Clarkson, Sr., observing him more uneasy than usual, said to him, Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach, to which Mr. Whitefield answered, True, sir, but turning aside, he clasped his hands together and, looking up, said, Lord Jesus, I am weary in thy work, but not of thy work.

If I have not finished my course, let me go and speak for thee once more in the fields, seal thy truth, and come home and die. His last sermon was from 2 Corinthians 13.5. Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith, prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? He dined at Captain Gilliam's, after dinner Whitefield and Mr. Parsons rode to Newburyport.

At the home of Parsons, Whitefield stood on a broad landing. He eats little, and spoke even less than was his desire to go to bed. As he makes his way toward the staircase, a crowd appears at the front door, begging him to give them a final message before he retires.

He greets them with the words, Bring me a candle, and this will be my bargain with you. I will agree to preach the gospel of Christ until this flame burns out. When the light from this candle goes out, I go to my bed, and you go to your homes.

So with this understanding, he struggles up a few stairs until he reaches a broad landing, and from there he pours his heart out to them one last time, presenting his master, Emmanuel. We can just imagine him there, on the staircase, the crowd huddled together in the street, hanging on every word, the candle in his frail hand, his chest heaving from his asthma, and very likely emphysema, a disease of the lungs that can be brought on from an asthmatic life. That image of him there, on the stairs, with the candle in his hand is a striking representation of the few stanzas from the famous poem, Only one life will soon be passed, only what's done for Christ will last, and as I lay dying, how good it shall be, if the lamp of my life has been burned out for thee.

And then he retired upstairs. He said that he would sit and read till I came to him. These are the comments of his assistant, Richard Smith.

Which I did as soon as possible, and found him reading in the Bible, with Dr. Watts' psalms lying open before him. He asked me for some water, grewl, and took about half his usual quantity, and kneeling down by the bedside, closed the evening with prayer. After a little conversation, he went to rest, and slept till two in the morning, when he awoke me, and asked for a little cider, of which he drank about a wine glass full.

I asked him how he felt, for he seemed to pant for breath. He told me his asthma was coming on him again, he must have two or three days rest, two or three days riding, without preaching, would set him up again. Soon afterwards, he asked me to put the window up a little higher, though it was up halfway all night, for, he said, I cannot breathe, but I hope I shall be better by and by.

A good pulpit sweat today may give me relief. I shall be better after preaching. I said to him, I wished he would not preach so often.

He replied, I had rather wear out than rust out. I then told him I was afraid he took cold in preaching yesterday. He said he believed he had, and then sat up in the bed, and prayed that God would be pleased

to bless his preaching where he had been, and also bless his preaching that day, that more souls might be brought to Christ, and prayed for direction, whether he should winter at Boston, or hasten to the southward, prayed for a blessing on his Bethesda college and his dear family there, for the tabernacle and chapel congregations, and all connections on the other side of the water, then laid down himself down to sleep again.

This was nigh three o'clock. At a quarter past four, he waked and said, My asthma, my asthma is coming on. I wish I had not given out word to preach at Haverhill on Monday.

I don't think I shall be able, but I shall see what today will bring forth. If I am no better tomorrow, I will take two or three days' ride. He then desired me to warm him a little gruel, and in breaking the firewood, I waked Mr. Parsons, who thinking I not for him, rose and came in.

He went to Whitfield's bedside, and asked him how he felt himself. He answered, I am almost suffocated. I can scarce breathe.

My asthma quite chokes me. I was then, not a little surprised, to hear how quick, and with what difficulty, he drew his breath. He got out of bed and went to the open window for air.

This was exactly at five o'clock. I went to him, and for about the space of five minutes saw no danger, only that he had a great difficulty in breathing, as I often had seen before. Soon afterwards he turned himself to me and said, I am dying.

I said, I hope not, sir. He ran to the other window, panting for breath, but could get no relief. It was agreed that I should go for Dr. Sawyer, and on my coming back, I saw death on his face, and he again said, I am dying.

His eyes were fixed, his under lip drawn inward every time he drew breath. He went towards the window, and we offered him some warm wine with lavender drops, which he refused. I persuaded him to sit down in the chair and have his cloak on.

He consented by a sign, but could not speak. I then offered him the glass of warm wine. He took half of it, but it seemed as if it would have stopped his breath entirely.

In a little time, he brought up a considerable quantity of phlegm and wind. I then began to have some small hopes. Mr. Parsons said he thought Whitfield breathed more freely than he did, and would recover.

I said, no sir, he is certainly dying. I was continually employed in taking the phlegm out of his mouth with a handkerchief, and bathing his temples with drops, rubbing his wrists to give him relief if possible, but all in vain. His hands and feet were as cold as clay.

When the doctor came in and saw him in the chair leaning upon my breast, he felt his pulse and said, he is a dead man. Mr. Parsons said, I do not believe it. You must do something, doctor.

He said, I cannot. He is now near his last breath. And indeed so it was, for he fetched but one grasp and stretched out his feet and breathed no more.

This was exactly at six o'clock. We continued rubbing his legs, hands and feet, with warm cloths, and bathed him with spirits for some time, but all in vain. I then put him into a warm bed, the doctor standing by, and often raised him upright, continued rubbing him, and putting spirits to his nose for an hour, till all

hopes were gone.

The people came in crowds to see him. I begged the doctor to shut the door. In the last visit, but one which Whitfield paid to America, he spent a day or two at Princeton, under the roof of the Reverend Dr. Finley, then president of the college at that place.

At dinner, the doctor said, Mr. Whitfield, I hope it will be very long before you will be called home, but when that event shall arrive, I should be glad to hear your noble testimony you will bear for God. You would be disappointed, doctor, said Whitfield. I shall die silent.

It has pleased God to enable me to bear so many testimonies for him during my life, that he will require none from me when I die. No, no, it is your dumb Christians that have walked in fear and darkness, and thereby been out of him on their deathbeds. This antidote was communicated by a gentleman now living, who was then a student at the college, and a boarder of Dr. Finley's family.

The manner of Whitfield's death verified his prediction. Well friends, that concludes our brief account of the death of George Whitfield. May his memory stir us to do greater things for God, and pray that God will be pleased to raise up another Whitfield for our day.

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