

Walter Thomas Prideaux Wolston

by John Bjorlie

The sermon highlights the life and legacy of Walter Thomas Prideaux Wolston, emphasizing his conversion, evangelistic efforts, and contributions to Christian thought and practice.

Scripture: Psalm 103:3, Romans 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:55, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 1 Timothy 1:15, James 4:8

Topics: "Evangelism", "Faithfulness"

Description

Walter Thomas Prideaux Wolston, born in England, lived a worldly life until he encountered God's grace and was transformed. After a powerful encounter with the gospel, he surrendered his life to Christ and became a devoted preacher and doctor, impacting many lives through his medical practice and gospel preaching. Despite controversies in the church, Wolston remained focused on evangelism and devotional themes, leaving a legacy of faithfulness and dedication to sharing the gospel until his passing in 1917.

Transcript

Walter Thomas Prideaux Wolston (1840-1917) was born at Brixham, Devon, in the far south of England, on the Channel, 40 kilometers from Plymouth. He was evidently surrounded and nurtured by godly influences. Around those parts at that time an F. Prideaux and an R. W. Wolston, probably related to Wolston, were active Christians in assembly life.

He had childhood recollections of his father inviting preachers, such as Charles Stanley to stay in their home. He said he had "a pious mother." "It is an inestimable boon for a man to have a praying mother and much, I know; mine prayed for me. But for twenty years I knew nothing of the grace of God, nothing whatever!"

According to his own testimony, he had been "about the most thorough-going young worldling you could have met." When preaching he would say, "There is not a man in this hall tonight, who was more deeply immersed in the world, in its pleasures, its sin and its enticements, nor a more downright, out-and-out slave of the devil, than the man who speaks to you tonight. Yet in one hour God saved me. Hence, I love to sing--

Jesus sought me when a stranger,

Wand'ring from the fold of God;

He, to rescue me from danger,

Interposed His precious blood."

While he never went far into the details of his career in sin, he did mention that he had lived for trifles, without a thought about God.

On leaving home, he entered a lawyer's office in his native town, intending to follow the legal profession. After office hours, "There was not a ball or a concert, a regatta or a cricket match, or a worldly entertainment of any kind, within twenty miles of where I was staying, that I was not in, if I could get to it."

On December 4, 1860, he left his country home in Devonshire for London to pursue his legal studies, planning to return home before Christmas to fulfill several engagements in his Glee Band. The first Sunday after reaching London his roommate suggested, "What do you say we go and hear Richard Weaver. I see in the papers he is going to preach in Surrey Theatre tonight." The coal miner turned preacher was an instant legend whose rousing preaching attracted huge crowds and won thousands to Christ. Henry Pickering heard him and said,

...a greater God-made preacher has not been known in living memory. The moment he began to speak--at least in his palmy days--he sent a power and reality through the hearts of the thousands who thronged to hear him. You felt God was there. The Spirit was working. The bleeding Lamb, of whom he loved to sing, was the center, and eternal issues were at stake.

Wolston could not have listened to a more dissimilar man. Wolston was an educated and cultured man. The preacher was an uneducated brute of a man who had been a feared boxer. His nickname was "Dauntless Dick."

Wolston's conscience took a beating that night. If he before had thought he was a sinner, now he also felt it. From Monday to Saturday, instead of spending the evening ranging the streets in search of the outer parameters of London's excesses, Walter and Tom went home early and prayed together and read from the Bible.

The following Sunday evening they went to hear Charles Stanley preach the gospel from the story of Solomon building the temple. The meeting concluded and Walter turned to his roommate, "What are you going to do?" Tom answered, "I am going home to have it out with God." "Well," Walter said, "you can go home; I shall stay and speak to Charles Stanley." In the vestry he met Charles Stanley, Mrs. Andrew Miller and her son Tom. Mrs. Miller had been watching for Walter.

People were being converted all around, and polite Englishmen kept asking, "Are you a Christian?" and then, "And would you like to become one?"

After a lengthy conversation, Tom Miller finally brought Walter to James 2:19 and there the light dawned. Walter Wolston entered by the door.

Recognizing that "a promise made is a debt unpaid," and that every Christian should honorably pay his debts, he wrote a letter to the conductor of the Glee Band, letting him know that since leaving home he had been converted to Christ. The Lord had put a new song into his mouth, and while he was willing to fulfill his legitimate engagements, he could now only sing about the Saviour who had done so much for him. Needless to say, he was relieved of his obligations.

Thereafter he took up the study of medicine. In 1864, sensing the Lord's call to Scotland, Wolston left behind lucrative possibilities in London and went to Edinburgh. He was appointed House Surgeon to the Old Infirmary after he had established a large private practice there. Dr. Wolston was a combination of professional ability, spiritual depth and personal warmth, "universally acknowledged to be a skillful and kindly Christian doctor." He always found time amid his busy practice to tell the old, old story. He also rented halls and theaters for gospel preaching. Few professional men in Scotland were privileged to present the gospel to so many. He had a drawing influence with young men, and frequently lectured Edinburgh University students on spiritual subjects.

In 1872 he began to edit God's Glad Tidings. The cover called it a "Monthly Magazine--Purely Gospel, for Free and General Circulation." It was twenty to thirty pages long and had no graphics. Some of the anonymous contributors were really Wolston's wife who would just leave one curious initial at the end of the article, such as the gospel appeal, Boast Not Thyself of Tomorrow by "X." She was his match in evangelistic zeal. They both veiled references to themselves in their articles, but we gather by reading closely that many of the conversion stories in the magazine are from their own way of life witnessing. Of course, as a medical doctor, especially in those days before sophisticated pain management, the medical doctor witnessed genuine soul trouble at the bedside of suffering and sometimes terminal patients. Wolston enjoyed great freedom to deal with souls. Their magazine, later retitled The Gospel Messenger, continued for forty-five years (the year of Wolston's death), and many of Wolston's gospel exhortations first appeared there.

An interesting encounter with the evangelist Donald Ross occurred sometime between 1874 and 1879. Ross had personally trained under Duncan Matheson the evangelist during the revival times of 1859-60, and in turn Ross had trained a corps of men in pioneer evangelism along the northwestern coast of Scotland. When Ross pulled out of the Free Church of Scotland he was vilified, the worst treatment coming from the unconverted Presbyterian ministers. Ross wondered where he should next go. "We were being much exercised about what was to be done. We had heard of 'Brethren,' but only as bad, bad people, and we resolved to have nothing to do with them. Our information, however, came from the parsons."

This was a deeply trying time to Ross. He had a large family to support and many new converts looking for direction. Donald's son, C. W. Ross, writes,

During this time of isolation he was approached by the Exclusive Brethren, who sought to win him to what they regarded as the Lord's way. He was invited to take tea in the house of one of them, and there met two of their leaders. The question was gone over quite fully, and, although, as he stated to the writer often since that time, the temptation was very great in the circumstances to cast in his lot with them, his difficulties were many, and nothing they could say removed them. It was the very same question with them as he was then contending with others about, the right on the part of any body of believers, great or small, to determine the lawfulness or otherwise of assemblies of the Lord's people. He had encountered the 'Exclusive' system soon after leaving the Free Church, and was not enamored of it then. And, although in this time of trial he was perhaps more disposed to listen to what they had to say than before or since, yet his mind ever rejected their pretension to be able to draw a circle in Christendom, inside of which only were meetings that could be recognized, and outside of which nothing was to be owned in the way of assemblies of the Lord's people. And we may add, when this pretension was adopted by others he was just as decided in rejecting it.

We have heard that W. T. P. Wolston was one of those men who met with Ross. Interestingly, between the years 1902 and 1908 Wolston himself would find the shoe on the other foot when the influences of F. E. Raven would send packing many evangelically-minded men.

Wolston cannot be termed a controversialist. Most of his writing is on evangelistic and devotional themes. He dearly loved to present the gospel. Regardless of the subject matter of his discourses to Christians, he would unswervingly finish by preaching God's salvation. Walter's brother Christopher injected himself into several controversies. Christopher was also a medical doctor. He is mentioned visiting John Darby shortly before Darby's death. The doctor asked the old man if he had any special thoughts as he viewed his death. Darby replied, "There are three things which I have dwelt much upon: God is my Father, and I am His gift to His Son; Christ is my righteousness; and Christ is my object in life, and my joy for eternity."

It is sometimes said that the so-called Exclusive Brethren are strong on Bible teaching but weak on evangelism, but this was not so in Wolston's day and in many branches of that movement it is not true today. Although keeping a low profile and shunning ostentation, men like Andrew Miller, Charles Stanley, George Cutting, C. H. Mackintosh and W. T. P. Wolston were all men who shone in the gospel. Paul spoke of a fellow traveler with Titus, "the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches" (2 Cor. 8:18). Stanley, Cutting, and Wolston would have all fit that description.

It appears that Wolston tried to stay clear of several church controversies that arose after John Darby's passing in 1882. In the fall of 1896, he stood by a grave in Cheltenham Cemetery and read Genesis 25:8-10 and Hebrews 8:10. The body being lowered into the ground belonged to Charles Henry Mackintosh. He must have wondered, as the true men of spiritual stature among them either died, or were being pushed out.

Finally, church problems between 1902 and 1908 caused WTPW to write a paper called "Hear the Right." He was an impassioned man who eschewed hypocrisy.

He gave up his medical practice in 1909, and thereupon answered invitations to visit Australia and New Zealand. He later visited Norway.

During the second visit to Norway in February, 1915, he had a stroke, and was brought home paralyzed to Weston-super-Mare. He lay helpless for two years. His wife testified that the helpless man was "happy in the Saviour's love." Those who nursed him never heard him once murmur. A few weeks before the end he had another stroke and passed into a coma. On March, 1917, at the age of seventy-six, the good doctor made his appointment with the great Physician, who forgives all our iniquities and heals all our diseases.

Years previously, Wolston had declared,

I truly confess, beloved friends, that the day when I say 'good-bye' to the earth, I shall say, from the bottom of my heart, 'Thank God.' If the Lord came tonight, we should break out, as we left the earth behind, into that noble paean, 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ'...I would not be anything but a Christian for ten thousand worlds; and if you are not one, it is high time you became one."

Books by Wolston:

Another Comforter: Thirteen Lectures on the Operations of the Holy Spirit

Backsliding and Restoration

Behold the Bridegroom: Ten Lectures on the Second Coming and Kingdom of the Lord Jesus

From Egypt to Canaan

Handfuls of Purpose: Let Fall for Eager Gleaners

Night Scenes of Scripture: Seventeen Bible Night Scenes

Forty Days of Scripture

Rest For the Weary: The Gospel from the Book of Ruth

Seekers for Light: Fourteen Addresses to Edinburgh Students

Simon Peter: His Life and Letters

The Call of the Bride: and Other Gospel Papers

The Church, What is It?: Ten Lectures on the Church of the New Testament

Young Men of Scripture: Nine Addresses to Young Men

We understand that W. T. P. Wolston also compiled a hymnbook which was reprinted at least seven times. A total of more than 88,000 copies were published by 1933. These hymns are included in the hymns database on the Truth for Today's Bereans CD-ROM.

Materials taken from:

W. T. P. Wolston, How I Found the Lord: the Conversion of W. T. P. Wolston, Gospel Tract Publications, Glasgow

Napoleon Noel, The History of the Brethren, Chapter Two, London

Harry Ironside, A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement, Loizeaux Bros., Neptune, NJ

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-bjorlie/walter-thomas-prideaux-wolston/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net