

Session 1:

The Beginnings:

The World That Welcomed John Wesley

Worldly people view trouble as something to avoid at all costs. However, those who understand the Kingdom concepts of Jesus know that suffering is the seedbed in which God grows wonderful new life. From the foulest fertilizer spring the most beautiful flowers. That fact is evident when we look at the sad state of Britain in the years immediately before John Wesley was born. To outsiders, the country seemed to be experiencing its best days. Militarily England was a superpower. It had defeated France in the War of Spanish Succession. The English Navy was the most powerful in the world, and it would eventually win America, the West Indies, India and Canada for the crown. In due time it would defeat Napoleon. The country was advancing as a leader in the Industrial Revolution. Politically, the Parliamentary system was replacing the monarchy. Monarchs could no longer make decisions and laws at a whim. Barbarous practices such as random imprisonment and torture no longer existed. Religious tolerance also was on the rise. Though **the Church of England (the Anglican Church)** was the official state religion, Catholics and *Dissenters* (Puritans and generally every other church besides Anglicans and Catholics) were tolerated, but generally viewed as second class citizens. A visitor to England in those days might look around and conclude that the country had few problems.

However, beneath the impressive facade the country had deep troubles. The English looked down their noses at France and its ruling class prone to gross excesses. England's aristocracy, however, was not much better. The wealthy controlled the government. Two-thirds of the House of Commons were chosen by the moneyed, and the poor were virtually unrepresented. Beyond that, the system of representation was hopelessly out of date. For example, Old Sarum,

once a town but for years since a sheep walk, still sent two representatives to Parliament, as did Dunwich, half under the sea, and Droitwich, an abandoned salt pit. At the same time, major industrial cities like Manchester and Birmingham had no representation at all. Scotland was allowed 45 members while the country of Cornwall, only 1/8 Scotland's size, sent 48. Approximately five percent of English men could legally vote. Scotland, with a population of two million, had only 3000 voters. Democracy was nonexistent. Slavery was deeply entrenched in British society, as was forced child labor. Bargeloads of children were shipped to work as cheap labor in Northern textile factories. Sophisticated economic theories had been developed, with the rationalization that the country's economy would collapse without slavery and child labor. Beneath the surface lay deeply rooted corruption. ³

Consider English law. During Wesley's entire lifetime the government punished women by public flogging and burning at the stake. Human heads of the executed were displayed in public places as a warning to would-be lawbreakers. It was the age of the pillory and the whipping post. Those who could not get out of debt were thrown into dark, disease infested debtors' prisons. Alcoholism was common even among high government officials. Alcohol abuse was rampant, even by children, with over 11 million gallons of gin consumed in 1750. Children could be legally hanged for picking a pocket or stealing a rabbit. In London, 75% of all children died before age five. Among the poor the death rate was even higher. In one orphanage only one of 500 orphans survived more than a year. Adultery was considered sport, and when a man was caught with another woman, the blame was laid not on the adulterous couple, but on his betrayed wife. ⁴

Then there was England's underwhelming king. George II is remembered as a man virtually without morals or principle, who surrounded himself with a cabinet as mediocre as he. He was described as "a little, hot-tempered, pugnacious monarch." Yet when he died, a puppet clergyman named Porteus (later Bishop Porteus) eulogized the mediocre monarch as one for whom the Earth was not good enough. So underneath the polished and proper exterior, England was a sick nation. In 1694, nine years before John Wesley was born, an Englishman wrote: "Our light looks like the evening of the world." Later, another, Bishop Rule, wrote: "From the year 1700 till about the era of the French Revolution, England seemed barren of all good. There was a gross, thick, religious and moral darkness; a darkness that might be felt."

However, other spirits were stirring...holy spirits in Christ-hearted people within the Church. Alone, though, they were not enough to bring about the change that was needed to reverse the downward spiral. Something stronger than evil was needed...something or someone. In 1703, into this dark setting, under unlikely circumstances a baby was born in Epworth, in the marshy rural English

county of Lincolnshire, to a rural priest and his wife. The date was June 17th. They named their new son John Wesley.

Sometimes it seems like the longer a nation exists, the cheaper life gets. How could a country as apparently civilized as England sink to a point where execution of children for stealing was considered justice? How can rational people grow so unable to distinguish right from wrong? Why do you think England opted to kill children instead of rehabilitate them? Could that happen here?

From a Long Line of Rebels

In the 11th century, England was conquered by William, Duke of Normandy. He struck a decisive victory at the Battle of Hastings October 14, 1066. But even long before that, John Wesley's ancestors occupied a prominent place in England. Their names back then were *Wesley*, *Westley* and *Wellesley*. The insignia on their coat of arms indicates some participated in the Crusades (the military expeditions by European Christians in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims). John Wesley's ancestors go a long way back.

Dissenters or ***Nonconformists*** were all the 18th century Protestant groups in Britain which were not Anglican, and which refused to adhere to the various Acts of Parliament which laid down the rules for conformity to the Church of England. These included Puritans and others.

John Wesley almost could not avoid his destiny as a church reformer. He descended from a line of rebels extending back literally for generations. Both his grandfathers were Dissenting ministers. One was thrown into prison more than once for bucking church tradition. Wesley's great-grandfather, Bartholomew Westley, was also considered a troublemaker. He studied medicine and divinity together at Oxford University. After ordination as an Anglican priest he was assigned a parish, but was so unorthodox his congregation threw him out.



Bartholomew took up with a company of persecuted Nonconformists of the time and began preaching in their assemblies. He suffered much for his convictions, and often held secret worship services for those few congregants who would risk gathering to worship.

John Wesley's grandfather, John Westley (pictured here, in the earliest known likeness of any of Wesley's relatives), in some