

Session 4:

Aldersgate

On the long journey back to England John Wesley sank into deep depression. On January 2, 1738 he wrote:

Being sorrowful and very heavy, though I could give no particular reason for it, and utterly unwilling to speak close to any of my little flock (about twenty persons), I was in doubt whether my neglect of them was not one cause of my own heaviness. In the evening therefore I began instructing the cabin boy: after which I was much easier.

He was tormented. "I have no heart, no vigour, no zeal in obeying; continually doubting whether I was right or wrong." Under the date January 24, 1738, we can feel the anguish in his famous statement:

I went to America to convert the Indians; but, O! Who shall convert me? ...It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity; but what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, what I the least of all suspected; that I who went to America to convert others was never myself converted to God.

Then Wesley added: "I am not sure of this." Many years later Wesley reprinted these words in his journal, describing his own unconverted state. He continues writing, groping and grasping, straining to understand why he had done everything correctly and sincerely, yet still felt no inner peace.

I have (given) up my friends, reputation, ease, country; I have put my life in my hand, wandering into strange lands; I have given my body to be devoured by the deep, parched up with heat, consumed by toil and weariness, or whatsoever God should please to bring upon me. But does all this...make me more acceptable to God? Does all I ever did, or can know, say, give, do, or suffer, justify me in His sight? Does all this give me a claim to the holy, heavenly, divine character of a Christian? By no means... I "am fallen short of the glory of God"; that my whole heart is "altogether corrupt and abominable"; and, consequently, my whole life; seeing it cannot be, than an "evil tree" should "bring forth good fruit": that "alienated" as I am from the life of God, I am a "child of wrath", ...an heir of hell...¹

The same day He remembered how scared he was of dying in the storm on his journey over, and described how useless his conditional faith was:

I have a fair summer religion. 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. Nor can I say, "To die is gain!"

I not only give my body to be burned...I now believe the Gospel is true...Whoever sees me, sees I would be a Christian...But in a storm I think, "What if the Gospel be not true?"²

Here, Wesley fights that great battle between the head and the heart, that so many of us have experienced.

"...they brought the (seizure-ridden) boy to him. ...and (the boy's father) said, if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.' And Jesus said to him, 'If you can! *All* things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mark 9:20-24)

"...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (I Cor. 1:18-20)

"...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." (I Cor. 1:23-25)

The stumbling block of many intellectuals is the leap of faith. They cannot rationally grasp the Atonement, and therefore discount, minimize or distort its meaning to fit their finite philosophical presuppositions. Why is simple faith so difficult for some people to attain? Why do simple faith and advanced learning seem at odds? Have you ever known someone who valued high education and who simultaneously scoffed at simple faith? Have you done that? What, or who, finally brought you to peace in your heart...if anything did? Is doubt always bad? Can it serve a useful purpose in the discipleship journey?

Wesley had to go through this long period of refining, a purging metamorphosis of self-examination. His mood is one of utter self-abasement:

All my works, all my righteousness, my prayers, need an atonement for themselves; so that my mouth is stopped. I have nothing to plead. God is holy; I am unholy. God is a consuming fire; I am altogether a sinner, meet to be consumed.³

The long four-month voyage back to America must have seemed like an eternity in which to contemplate his failure, to the man who would not waste a minute or a sheet of paper. However, Wesley never faced hardship with complete defeat. He and his companions decided to spend the time in strict self-imposed disciplines. They reduced their number of meals and limited their diet to rice and biscuits. One night John had to sleep on the floor, and concluded a bed was a luxury he could do without! The discovery delighted him. Each time Wesley deprived himself of something, he considered himself set free from that particular encumbrance. J. Brotherton's quote is descriptive of Wesley: "My riches consist not in the extent of my possessions, but in the fewness of my wants." Denying oneself is mastery of the senses and discipline of the will. He viewed his soul as a fortress under attack, and each of his senses an open gate for the devil to walk through. An appetite starved into submission was an enemy hanged! So, each day, each hour he and his comrades lived by a strict, methodical schedule. They rose from bed at 4 a.m. and performed a succession of ordered tasks—meditations and spiritual exercises—that left not a single moment of time for leisure, until 10 p.m., when they went to sleep.

Homecoming

Arriving in England, still deeply depressed, Wesley wrote, "I could do nothing for four days." His ministry had failed and his reputation was severely damaged. This little priest, who was so careful to read the prayers of the Church and obey the laws of the land, had been heartbroken, accused by his own flock of criminal wrongdoing, arrested, humiliated and driven from their country. News of his failure reached England before he did, and he arrived a refugee seriously discredited. He had pinned high hopes on pastoral success in America, but returned more a failure than ever, back to the same place he had fled two years before. His future looked bleak. He had nowhere else to go. Any further change would have to come from within.

Yet Another Blow

The same time Wesley returned, another ship was about to set sail for America. Boarding it was his friend from the Holy Club, George Whitefield. One of the few things to which John had looked forward was a reunion with his friend, and he resented that so wonderful a preacher was about to waste his gifts in Georgia. Wesley prayed, concluded that God's will was for Whitefield to cancel