



David Brainerd: A Missionary Legend and Legacy

By Mack Tomlinson

“God’s Word opened to my soul with divine clearness, power, and sweetness, so as to appear exceeding precious, and with clear and certain evidence of its being the Word of God.” – David Brainerd

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David Brainerd, the 18th century missionary to the New England Indians, was born April 20, 1718, into a respectable Haddam, Connecticut family. He was the third son of his parents, Hezekiah and Dorothy Brainerd, and one of nine children. Two of Brainerd’s brothers, Nehemiah and John, were both godly ministers themselves. Nehemiah served as a pastor in Eastbury, Connecticut, and John followed David to the work among the Indians in New Jersey after his brother’s early death.

Although unconverted in his teenage years, divine providence led young Brainerd in the direction of home mission work and into a path that would make him one of the foremost missionaries in all of Christian history.

By the time he was twenty-two years old, Brainerd had come to see very clearly that salvation was the work of God alone. He wrote the following in his diary:

"I read Mr. Stoddard's [Solomon] Guide to Christ, which I trust, in the hands of God, was the means of my conversion, and my heart rose against the author; for though he told me my very heart all along under convictions, and seemed to be very beneficial to me in his directions, yet here he failed, for he did not tell me anything I could DO that would bring me to Christ, but left me, as it were, with a great gulf fixed between, without any direction to get through. For I was not yet effectually and experimentally taught that there could be no way prescribed, whereby a natural man could, of his own strength, obtain that which is supernatural, and which the highest angel cannot give" (Diary of David Brainerd, Vol. 2, p. 318).

His own testimony continues:

"Sometime in the beginning of the winter of 1738, it pleased God, as I was walking out one Sunday morning, to give me suddenly such a sense of my danger and of the wrath of God, that I stood amazed, and my former good sentiments vanished away. I was much distressed all that day from the view I had of my sin and vileness, fearing that the vengeance of God would soon overtake me. I lived this way until February of 1739, with my wicked heart sometimes wishing there were some other way of salvation than by Jesus Christ, and I used to imagine that my heart was not as bad as Scripture represents it to be.

"I continued on in this miserable way until July 12, when I was walking once again in the same place in a dark and thick grove, when suddenly unspeakable glory seemed to open to the view of my soul. I do not mean an external brightness, but a new and inward apprehension of the view that I had previously had of God, such as I never had before. I stood still, wondered, and admired! I knew that I had never seen anything comparable, as to excellency and beauty. I had no particular apprehensions of any one of the Persons of the Trinity, but it appeared to be divine glory that I then beheld. My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable to see such a God, such a glorious Divine Being, and I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that He should be God over all for ever and ever.

"At this time, the way of salvation was opened to me with such wisdom and excellency, that I wondered I should ever have thought of any other way of salvation; I was amazed I had not dropped my own efforts and complied with this lovely and excellent way before. I wondered that all the world did not see and comply with this way of salvation, which is entirely by the righteousness of Christ.

"I was spending some time in prayer and self-examination, when the Lord so shined in my heart that I enjoyed full assurance of His favor, and my soul was unspeakably refreshed with divine and heavenly enjoyments" (Journal, abridged edition, Baker, 1978, pp. 12-26).

Brainerd's conversion was not long before he began his college studies. Soon after, in September 1739, he went to Yale College. He walked with God from the beginning of his college days, and was able to testify that, "God's Word opened to my soul with divine clearness, power, and sweetness, so as to appear exceeding precious, and with clear and certain evidence of its being the word of God." (Ibid, p. 26)

Brainerd's Passion for God Himself

In the months that followed, Brainerd's Christian experience seemed to grow deeper and more precious to his soul with depth and consistency. He wrote of this in such a way that his intimacy and true familiarity with God was obvious:

"One day in June, [1740], I was walking a considerable distance from college, in the fields alone at noon, and in prayer I found such unspeakable sweetness and delight in God, that I thought, if I must continue in this evil world, I wanted always to be there, to behold God's glory. My soul dearly loved all mankind and longed exceedingly that they should enjoy what I enjoyed. It seemed to be a little resemblance of heaven" (Ibid, p. 27).

He later writes,

"I longed to be conformed to God in all things; this has been a day that I enjoyed much of the light of God's countenance most of the day, and my soul rested in God; O! One hour with God infinitely exceeds all the pleasures and delights of this lower world."

Such a heart for seeking after God himself was one of the outstanding characteristics of Brainerd's spiritual pilgrimage. He was inflamed with a passion both to know Christ and to make him known, especially to those who were completely ignorant of him. This personal and loving passion for the glory of God in Jesus Christ ultimately became a missionary passion that would take him to live and labor among the New England Indians.

Missions and Revival among the Indians

We haven't the time here to speak of what happened during Brainerd's college career. At this point, it is sufficient to say that he did not graduate from Yale, but instead was providentially thrust out into Gospel work without the opportunity of a Yale degree. He was invited by the Scottish Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge to interview as a missionary candidate in November 1742. After the interview, the society viewed Brainerd as the ideal person they had in mind and appointed him to begin mission work in April 1743.

His first appointment was among an Indian tribe located at Kaunaumeeck, 20 miles from Stockbridge, Massachusetts. John Sergeant, who had personally studied under Jonathan Edwards, was already settled among the Indians at Stockbridge. It was Sergeant who befriended Brainerd and undertook to tutor him in the study of Indian dialects during 1743-44.



Brainerd began laboring in much prayer and preaching among the Indians in 1744 but saw very little fruit. Then, as Edwards later wrote, "God was pleased to display his power and grace, and a work of conviction, awakening, and conversion began among the Indians which closely resembled what had earlier occurred among the civilized citizens during the Great Awakening in Massachusetts" (Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography, Banner of Truth, 1987, p. 302). This was, indeed, a true revival, a day of God's power, an outpouring like Pentecost, among various Indian tribes, which continued and spread supernaturally without human manipulation or aid. Of this work, Brainerd records in his diary in October of 1745:

"I preached from John 14:1-6; the divine presence seemed to be in the assembly; numbers were affected with divine truth; how great is the change lately made upon numbers of the Indians, who not many months ago were thoughtless and averse to Christianity, and how astonishing is that grace which has made this change . . . to see those who were very recently savage pagans and idolaters, having no hope, and without God in the world, now filled with a sense of divine love and grace, and worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth as numbers here appear to do, and to see them so tender and humble, as well as lively, fervent, and devout in the divine service" (Abridged Diary, Baker, pp. 178-179).

That same year of 1745, Edwards wrote about Brainerd to an acquaintance in Scotland: "Mr. Brainerd has lately had more success than ever. This Mr. Brainerd is a young gentleman of very

distinguishing qualifications, remarkable for his piety and eminent zeal for the good of souls, for his knowledge of divinity [theology] and the solidity of his judgment and his prudence of conduct" (Ibid, p. 303).

It was within two years, in the winter of 1746-47, that Brainerd, suffering regularly from tuberculosis, decided he would take leave of his work and travel to the Edwards' home in Northampton, Massachusetts. What Brainerd and the Edwards did not know when Brainerd arrived, was that 'his life and ministry were almost over'. (Ibid, p. 303) Brainerd stayed in the Edwards' home from winter until the following October, and seemed to improve. But the hope of his improvement was before long crushed again, and by June, Jerusha (Edwards' daughter) would write of him: "He is extremely weak . . . he says it is impossible for him to live long, for he has hardly vigor enough to draw his breath."

It was during this period that Brainerd wrote to his brother John, who would also labor among the Indians in New Jersey: "My soul longs that you should be fitted for, and in due time go into the work of the ministry; do not be discouraged because you see your elder brothers in the ministry die early; I declare that now I am dying, but I would not have spent my life otherwise for the whole world" (Ibid, p. 304).

In July, Brainerd was somewhat recovered again and expressed longings for God and His glory alone: "This day", he wrote on July 25, "I saw clearly that I should never be happy, yea, that God himself could not make me happy, unless I could be in a capacity to please and glorify him for ever" (Ibid. p. 305). Apparently, Brainerd's health remained at least stable into the fall. He went to the Northampton church meeting for the weekday service on the first Wednesday in

September, but, as Edwards would later say, "it was the last time he ever went out our gate alive".

Brainerd's last time to rise from his sick bed was on September 29, 1747. It was at the funeral, preached by Edwards, that he recalled the evening of Brainerd's last day on earth:

"A little before his death, he said to me, as I came into the room, 'My thoughts have been employed on the old dear theme of the prosperity of God's church on earth. As I waked out of sleep, I was led to cry for the pouring out of God's Spirit and the advancement of Christ's kingdom, which the dear Redeemer died and suffered so much for'. A few days before his death, he desired us to sing a psalm concerning the prosperity of Zion . . . and at his desire we sang a part of the 102nd Psalm, which upon being done, though he was then so low that he could scarcely speak, he so exerted himself, that he prayed very audibly, wherein, besides praying for those present and for his own [Indian] congregation, he earnestly prayed for the reviving and flourishing of true religion in the world" (Journal, Vol. 2, p. 35).

Brainerd died around 6:00 a.m. on Friday, October 9, 1747, at the age of 29 years. According to the record of his own journal, he was a Christian for only eight years, and a preacher and missionary for six of those years. Yet he was a flame for God during the full course of his spiritual journey and certainly exemplified the words of the hymn writer:

*Only one life,
Will soon be past;
Only what's done
For Christ will last;*

*And when I am dying,
How glad I will be
That the lamp of my life
Has been burned out for Thee.*

David Brainerd's was such a life, and his legacy continues in the hearts of God's people even into the 21st century.