

# The Life of George Whitefield

*History in the First Person*

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Good morning. I must tell you from my heart what a pleasure it is to be here again to see many familiar faces and some others, and to share what the Lord has given me. I must tell you what it means to a teacher to see former students and how the Lord has used them over the years. Forty-five years is a remarkable record, by the grace of God, and I know it's been only by the grace of God but God uses people and Marty and Greg have been used of the Lord in this place and it gives me great joy to share in the anniversary once again. We've been maturing together over these years. I became recently conscious that if the Lord gives me three more months of life on this earth, I will have spent as many years as there are keys on your piano, and I marvel at that and am grateful for that.

George Whitefield is a remarkable man whom God has used. He who could command angels to do his bidding invites men and women. That's been the theme of this series of first person presentations. God uses men and women. I repeat, how long would it have taken the angels to have fulfilled the Great Commission to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature if the Lord had given that commission to them? But he did not. He gave it to men and women. He gave it to his disciples and these thousands years later we are his disciples and that commission is still addressed to us. God uses people. We are people and God can use each of us as he is in this place.

George Whitefield was a remarkable servant of a gracious and loving God. His name is spelled like white field but we don't pronounce it as white, we say whit, Whitefield. Eighty percent of the entire population of the American colonies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw and heard George Whitefield in person. Without any amplification mechanical, his voice was a remarkable gift. He could be heard at great distances. So much a skeptic as Benjamin Franklin witnessed his voice and saw the crowds of thousands, perhaps as many as 30,000 in Boston at one time, and Franklin calculated the distance from the speaker to the most distant standing hearer and drew an imaginary circle with that as the diameter point and calculated on the basis of two square feet per person how many people could have fit in that circle. God had given to George Whitefield a remarkable voice, a fertile imagination, a creative mind, and a redeemed heart.

Now, the Methodist brothers were reared in a parson's home but George Whitefield was born into an inn, a bar, a hotel, a restaurant, a news agency. All of those were wrapped up into the Bell Inn in Gloucester, England. In those days, a tavern was all of those things.

Yes, it dispensed liquors, it served food, it provided rooms, and because there were few alternatives for learning what's going on in the world, travelers staying in the inn would be quizzed by the local people about what's going on in the outside world. We take for granted all kinds of communication and we know instantly what's going on anywhere in the world and that was not then the case. Not all of the tavern represented sin, but there was ample sin present, to be sure.

Now in these minutes, God willing, I ask you once again to imagine that I am George Whitefield and I'm going to tell you the story of my life and you know I don't look anything like him and it's an imagination, but you're good at that, so put it on.

I was born in the last month of the year 1714. I spent 56 years on this earth and died in Newburyport, Massachusetts in 1770. Fifty-six years, parts of 56 years I spent on this earth, a rather long life at that time. God gave me a mother who had a great love for the Lord. For 14 weeks after I was born, she remained ill and took that as a divine indication that there was something special about this boy. I was the sixth and last of the sons born to the family, there were daughters also, and she took a special concern for me and expected that God was going to use in ways that she could not imagine.

I grew up in the inn but she, my mother, kept me from participating for many years in any of the activity of the inn. She wanted to shield me as she nurtured me, and as time went on, I began to give evidence of a voice and a dramatic interest that was expressed by reading and acting out plays and poems. God gave me a voice in a day when there were no means of amplifying the human voice and it was a remarkable instrument for which I could take no credit. But I enjoyed imagining characters in plays and allowed reciting them and creating characters. That voice was to be used by a gracious God in years that were to come.

I say my mother had a special care for me and care to keep me from the negative effects of the tavern. I was sent early to a church school, a kind of grammar school. In those days, grammar school meant learning Latin or Greek grammar in preparation for university. There seemed to be no likelihood of my going to university at that time, but at the age of 12, I was matriculated into a church school and prepared grammar for the hopeful entrance to university, but there appeared at this time little likelihood of my concern for a university or likelihood of the possibility of the expense but God had plans.

Grammar school, I say, at the age of 12 and I would spend a lot of time acting out and reciting plays and imagining characters and God gave me, I say, a voice. He also gave me a mark of my early youth in the squint of an eye. I had measles very early in life and a nurse paid too little attention, as a result, my left eye was squinty. It seemed as if I was looking toward my nose with that eye all the time. Some people made much of that as a divine or devilish mark, but it was unique at least.

When I was two years old, my father died. That left a heavy burden on my mother. When six years later she remarried, unwisely as it turned out, a man who was an ironmonger and had little gentility, he ruined the inn and mother finally left him six years later, but it

was in those circumstances when the likelihood of my advance education was remote that God was preparing for what I did not yet know. The likelihood of my being able to go to college, I say, was remote until a friend of my grammar school days visited the tavern and renewed acquaintance and told me of his position as a servator at Oxford University. A servator was a kind of servant of the wealthy students at the university. He served their tables. He cleaned their rooms. He improved their dress and their shoes. He had the obligation of checking their rooms every evening to be sure they were present, and in that respect did not win friends. A servator was able with minimum income, therefore, to get his Oxford training without having to pay much for it, but it meant a lot of work.

Now God was working also in my soul and I was becoming very concerned. The school I had attended was a church school and I knew much of the workings of the church, the Church of England, and the forms and the ritual and so forth, and I was beginning to be much concerned for the well-being of my immortal soul and this concern God translated into a great deal of self-examination and of external identification and efforts to recite and participate in ecclesiastical doings and I was troubled of soul. It was while I was a servator at the university in Pembroke College, you know the Oxford University is composed of many separate colleges and nobody attends the university, they attend one of the colleges in the university and it is the university that grants the degree. But in Pembroke College, I was very much concerned for the well-being of my soul and I proceeded to fast, virtually fast for six weeks. I ate only meager bread and drank weak tea and did much to ruin my physical constitution until I was bedridden and my tutor, a tutor was a professor who was responsible for a particular student, finally came and saw my deteriorated physical condition, acquired a doctor for my needs, as a result I had to withdraw from the college. I was too weak and my body was much weakened and I went home and while home, sought to repeat as many religious exercises as I could, and take the sacrament as often as I could, and confess sins as often as I could think of them until finally strengthened and deciding to become a priest in the church, that meant going back to Oxford, to Pembroke College, and completing the degree.

I must tell you that at the age of 20, having cried, "I thirst," I therein threw myself on God and drank of the water of life. I recorded my words at that time. I'm 20 years old. It's 1735. I said, "Oh, with what joy that was full of glory was my heart filled when the weight of sin went off and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God and a full assurance of faith broke in upon my disconsolate soul. Surely it was a day to be had in remembrance. My joys were like a spring tide and overflowed the banks. It was the deliverance from the burden that had so heavily oppressed me."

Twenty years old. My life had begun as a servant of Jesus Christ. I knew not what that would mean but I'm back and preparing now to become a priest in the Church of England. A priest, a pastor, I expected, and a two-stage ordination, first as a deacon, and the bishop who ordained me at the age of 21 had declared he would ordain none younger than 23, assuming none was ready, spiritually mature enough before then, but he saw in me the possibility of God's usefulness and I was ordained a deacon. Not like a deacon in a Baptist church, but the first stage of participating as an eventual priest.

Two years later, ordained a priest and very soon given an opportunity to preach in a church in London filling in for a pastor there. I proceeded to preach as a dying man to dying men and my preaching was not formal academic dissertations as typical in that time, dull, dry, mournfully presented with manuscript from a stone pulpit attached to a stone wall of a dead structure called a church, but I proceeded to communicate the Gospel of saving grace to dying men and women.

Very soon I enjoyed association with John and Charles Wesley. The Wesley brothers had gone to the American colonies to convert the Indians and John Wesley preached but was not himself converted and was trying in the flesh to do the work of the Spirit. He later said, "I went to the colonies to convert the Indians but, oh," and that was a mournful oh, "who will convert me?" And as a failure which he compounded by an unwise attempt at a love affair, he was jilted and he proceeded to take it out on her in ecclesiastical discipline and lost any reputation that he had yet in the village in Georgia. But he saw the need there for the building of an orphanage. Many colonists came and with the rigors of life as pioneers, did not live long. Many of them left orphaned children and they were not otherwise cared for an Wesley had the idea but was never able to implement it and left it for me, as it were, to build in Oglethorpe, Georgia, at Savannah, Bethesda was its name, house of mercy, an orphanage for children and I spent much of the rest of my life raising monies in England and elsewhere for the building and the maintaining of that orphanage. Though never accused of preaching for money and not really accused of mishandling those funds, built and tried to sustain and for several generations sustained this house of mercy for the benefit of many young people.

Well, having returned to England, John Wesley invited me to go to Georgia and there build the orphanage and carry on the work which had effectively failed. Our names continued to be associated, Wesley and Whitefield, though great strain in the personal friendship of the two of us because of Wesley's doctrinal differences from mine and severe differences. He later taught a doctrine of Christian perfection. He believed that the sin nature can be eradicated in this life and he held, of course, to the doctrine of the freedom of the will and assumed everyone's likelihood, everyone's possibility of personal decision for Christ. He denied the principle of divine predestination and believed that that meant there was no need to preach which, of course, was not the case.

We retained a relationship, a friendship however distant, but our paths diverged and now I make the first of what were seven journeys to the American colonies. That meant travel by ship. I must explain travel by ship in the 1700s. Wind. Oars would not cross an ocean, wind moved the sails to cross an ocean. Travel across the ocean by ship meant weeks, once as long as three months. The trip westward to the Americas took longer than the trip eastward from the Americas to England. The winds made that difference. Imagine the supplies of water and food required for a month or more for everyone on board a ship that was dependent on wind.

One trip, I say, took three months. I spent a total of two years on the sea in my lifetime but they were not fruitless years. I found opportunity to preach and teach. At first as I took ship, hard sailors and their masters did not have much to do with this Anglican priest

and I proceeded to take the time, days and weeks of time, to befriend myself. I would walk among the crew and the masters as well, and communicate and make friendly conversation and win respect and friendship and eventually was permitted to have a brief testimony. I'd give a Gospel presentation in the morning until finally it was expected of me every day, and men drew near and fellowshiped, gave opportunity for communication. On one occasion on one such ship crossing when we were carrying a number of soldiers to the New World, we were accompanied by two smaller ships who were helping to protect this convoy of soldiers and in a time of windlessness, the three ships moored close together at sea and I was able to preach to all three from the deck of one and God gave fruit from such opportunities.

God gave me a voice. I have been called The Awakener. God used me to awaken sleeping saints to their obligation to give the Gospel to dying men and to awaken sleeping sinners of the peril of their souls.

He gave me a voice. I take no credit for it. I enjoyed the use of it and the ability to communicate emotion with it, to tell stories with it, and it had the capacity of being heard, it was carefully declared a mile away. It has been said by your generation that no man since the days of the apostles had been heard in person face-to-face by more people than George Whitefield with the aid of mechanical reproduction, any kind of expanded outreach, face-to-face with the unaided ear.

I was not a pulpit preacher. I was a field preacher and I had begun to be a pulpit preacher and in England when I began to preach, having acquired my ordination and worn my gown, I excoriated dead priests living physically but spiritually dead, for their scholastic treatises presented in a dull monotone from a written text with little eye contact, even, with their hearers, and I declared many of them unconverted and it did not take long before the pulpits of England were closed to me. But the message was still boiling within so I took to the fields and became a field preacher. In England were many places, fields, open areas. They were opportunities for gathering people. All I sought was a mound of some kind on which to stand. Any rise in the earth or a table or the back of a wagon or any such opportunity to be elevated slightly, positioned myself so that my voice went downwind and could be heard at distances, and then with the voice God had given and with the dramatic interest that my youth had evidenced, told the stories of Scripture, acted them out, as it were.

They were not heavy scholastic, well-reasoned arguments. They were reliving the Scriptures and people were transported, they were mesmerized. People listened and their own hearts were stirred and their souls were convicted. I gave no invitations. I did not appeal. I simply said, "Look! Look at your Savior on the cross! Look!" And I would proceed to visualize in words and people were melting by the Spirit of God. And I called for no sinners to respond, the Spirit of God caused them to respond. And they would come to my lodging and my lodging was wherever I was preaching, whatever host would give me an overnight lodge and a meal, and they would come afterward and I would counsel with as many as I could, and they would counsel each other as some were satisfied by the grace of God in their own souls, and God did a remarkable thing.

Thousands and in some cities, tens of thousands, I read in Philadelphia at least 15,000, 4,000 in Middletown, Connecticut, in Savannah, in Charleston, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 7,000. These were people in one place in fields hearing the Gospel and the Spirit of God imposing it upon their souls and men crying out in repentance and receiving the grace of God. God did a remarkable thing. It was estimated I preached 18,000 sermons in 34 years. That's an average of 530 sermons each year, almost 10 each week, and almost 2 sermons a day. Life, my life was preaching and the Spirit of God was using the preacher and he gave the voice and worked in the heart and the Spirit of God won a remarkable harvest.

How to say it? I was married briefly and that's an overstatement. I wrote a letter to a widow woman and proposed very indirectly, proposed all the problems that would accompany a marriage between us and listed all the reasons she should hesitate to respond positively, and incidentally, I was asking for her hand in marriage. One such opportunity, the lady never even replied. Sometime later, another circumstance identical, she replied hesitantly, but on neither of our parts was any pledge of love or affection. It was something I thought I ought to do and as it turned out we married. We had an infant son who died in infancy. We never had a home really. I was gone for months at a time. I lived wherever I was preaching, I say, whoever would provide me a bed for the night and a meal. I was away more than I was with. It was a strange kind of relationship. It was something I thought I ought to do.

Well, I spent time in Ireland preaching and in Scotland. One trip to the Netherlands. A total of seven trips to the United States before it was the United States. A total of 23 years of preaching in England, Scotland and Ireland. Nine years preaching in America. And two years on the ships at sea. Thirteen crossings to America, 13 crossings of the ocean. The 14<sup>th</sup> did not occur because I died in Newburyport, Massachusetts and never returned to England.

I had opportunity to meet and enjoy fellowship with Jonathan Edwards, enjoyed that time together, shared our mutual love for the Savior and for the souls for whom he died. It was the time of the first Great Awakening in America which I helped to spread throughout the Americas, both in the north and in the south. I did little to protect my physical health. I would preach beyond my body's ability to sustain it. I said I thought that a good preaching sweat was the best medicine, so I would perspire as I preached and felt better. To bed carefully at 10 o'clock each night. Up at 4 each morning. Often preaching at 6 o'clock in the morning. I say, at least once a day, often twice, and as I said, about 10 on the average each week.

It is said that my preaching was the first national event in America's history and did much to create a sense of unity among the colonies which were not much united for much of the pre-Constitution years. One common experience was the Whitefield preaching, and I say all I would do was act out so that people saw in the mind's eye and felt in the mind the experiences of Scripture. I would describe the crucifixion and people would weep and they would come afterward and seek counsel and they would rejoice, and they would rejoice loudly, audibly. They would drown out often the preacher himself. This was the

Spirit of God at work. It was not a tactic by the preacher. God moved wonderfully and marvelously for these several years.

I was careful to maintain friendship with the Wesleys, though we had strained relations. He was more straining than I. He wrote and published much opposing the doctrines of grace, the Reformed teaching. He believed, Wesley, that if God had ordained who would be saved, there was no need to preach, and thought I was doing wrong by not calling men to exercise their free will when the Spirit of God was exercising his will in the hearts of men, and for drawing them unto repentance. But he was my senior. I retained a friendship with him. I did not publish contrary to him as vehemently as he did to me. I once made the observation later that one of my followers asked me if he thought we would see Wesley in heaven and I said, "No. No, I fear not." And he was encouraged at what he thought was true and then I continued by replying, "I expect Mr. Wesley will be so close to the throne of God and we so far from it that we will not see him," which is not at all what he thought.

I left word while I was living that I wished Mr. Wesley to preach my funeral sermon when that day should come. As it turned out, I was in America when in Newburyport, Massachusetts, having finished preaching in the open, I retired to the place where I had been given lodging for the night and while ascending the stairs to the second floor to a bed, a crowd forced the door of the house and asked for another word from Mr. Whitefield and on the steps leading to the upper floor, I stopped and preached briefly. Finally retired and in the middle of that night awakened with a severe attack of a childhood asthma, could not breathe. A doctor was called and said there was nothing he could do and by 6 o'clock that morning, I awoke in a better place which has been my home ever since. I asked to be buried when the day should come under the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Although England asked for my body, the church in Newburyport had begun to prepare a crypt under the pulpit in Newburyport where my body was interred but my soul had ascended.

God uses human instruments to accomplish divine purpose and this human instrument had passed to a better land. A nation was born, in a sense, in a continuing revival. No effort to sustain it except by the Spirit of God. Men and women, be grateful for the testimony of faithful men and women over centuries. The awakening preacher was used in this time and his memory remains, though mine is fading. And his ministry was fruitful. Be by the power of the Spirit of God, what God calls you to be. Do what by the grace of God you are enabled to do. Carry on the ministry, the message, and by the grace of God may he prosper this ministry in the days that lie ahead.

*Our Father, we acknowledge with gratitude thy mercies toward us in giving us the memory of men whom thou hast used, men and women who called of thee have been sterling saints and effective ministers of truth. May each of us in his place by day and by night, at work and at play, so live and labor that others seeing us shall know we have been with Christ and may they desire to know him whom to know aright is life eternal. Thank you for these hours of anniversary and for this ministry which thou hast raised up and hast maintained these years. Continue, therefore, we pray, thy doings in our midst as*

*we give thee praise for thy gracious mercy to the children of men. Dismiss us by thy grace and use us in thy place. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*