

John Wesley: A Man of One Book

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It should not be necessary for a history teacher to express his appreciation for a church that commemorates Reformation Month. I very much appreciate the fact of this commemoration, the concern for the memory and the contribution of those of former centuries who hazarded their lives for the Gospel's sake. It's a special joy to be here. I appreciate your presence with the good group that was here Wednesday night, and the opportunity of sharing in this special month. I feel very much the stanza that began that we sang a few moments ago, "We rest on thee, our sense of weakness feeling." I very much feel that. I'm very much more comfortable coming as a figure from a different century than I am invading the sacred desk. I say it again, I very much am sobered by the responsibility that the pulpit ministry represents and I do not approach it lightly.

Over these recent years, I have shared with you the lives of 16th century figures: John Knox in Scotland again this coming Wednesday; Martin Luther from Germany; William Tyndale, I think last year; Mr. Latimer last week; Mr. Bunyan, John Bunyan a few years ago from the 17th century; and Charles Spurgeon from the 19th century. That leaves the 18th century untouched. I was touched some time ago when Dr. Abrams presented Jonathan Edwards in this country. I want to observe something of the 18th century English figure of whom there were two important ones, of course, John Wesley, George Whitefield.

And just by way of introduction, let me remind you of the fact that each of these Reformers, your pastor already in his opening prayer this evening went through my entire introduction when he introduced the three doctrinal principles of the Reformation, and our souls rejoiced with the recollection and with the repetition. Justification by faith only plus nothing. The priesthood of every believer. Immediate access to the throne of God through no man, with one Mediator only, the man Christ Jesus. Then the absolute and final authority of the word of God, the Scriptures. How central was the Scriptures to each of these men, both in his conversion and his subsequent ministry. It was embraced as the word of God from heaven to men and it was the power of God and it was that which turned countries and soon continents from ignorance to understanding.

This evidence on the authority of the Scripture is suggested in a quotation from John Wesley. I read this many years ago and it struck me then as I pray it will strike us now. "I have thought," John Wesley said in the 18th century in an England that had become so

secular and rationalist that one historian said it was almost as if Christianity had been proved to be a myth, so little was the Gospel believed in England. In England from which much of our Gospel has come, from the British Isles, I'll include the Scots and the Irish, yes, the country which came to its pilgrims and its Puritans, to this land and brought us the Gospel and yet how much that had faded in the very land from which they came. And while in Latimer's words he prayed that that candle that they lit at their death would not be put out, though it has flickered often, still God has been faithful. "I have thought," Wesley wrote, "I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air, I am a spirit come from God. I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. How to land safely on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book. At any price, give me the book of God. I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book."

Those are Wesley's words. They were not always his words. Born the eldest son of a family of 19 to a poor pastor in the Church of England. Only six of those 19 children lived to become adults. Brother to Charles, who was to be the hymnwriter. In childhood, snatched from the burning when enemies of his father burned down the parsonage and the little boy, John, was discovered in an upper floor in the midst of the flames and rescued. Of special concern of his mother, Susannah, who was specially concerned for all her children. Reared them carefully. Reared them spiritually. Reared them with concern for their coming to the knowledge of Christ.

As a young adult, choosing to follow his father's path, entering Oxford University to become a priest/pastor in the Church of England. There becoming part of a holy club, a group of men students who sought to spend certain hours of the days of certain weeks, of certain days of the week, doing good works: ministering to those in need; visiting in prisons which were terrible places in that day, which were places where the insane and debtors and criminals were indiscriminately housed together,; and ministering to those in various kinds of needs; seeking by good works to earn favor with heaven; desiring to know how to be accepted above but having no peace in the fulfillment of these duties. Ordained a minister. Briefly assisted in his father's parish and then went across the sea to something called Georgia where a colony had been established by Oglethorpe, and where an orphanage was begun and one of John Wesley's purposes was to convert the Indians. He crossed the sea. He arrived on this shore. Was met by a Moravian missionary, Spangenberg his name, and was greeted with the words, "Welcome. Do you know Jesus Christ?" And John Wesley replied, "I know he is the Savior of the world," and his greeter replied, "But do you know that he is your Savior?" And to this, John Wesley was yet silent. Much busy in the work of the ministry but ignorant of the Gospel of redeeming grace. He knew it in his head, he knew it not in his heart.

Labored fruitlessly and acted in some respects unwisely. Soon saw the wisdom of returning to England, but depressed and in a sense of failure, crossing the ocean and meeting ship storm at sea en route home. Observing the contrast between the stability and the peaceful quiet of certain Moravians aboard the ship, kneeling in prayer on the deck

while he was fearful of dying, he who had been serving God in so many ways for so many years was in terror and these had something that he had not.

Seeking them out after arriving safely in England, he who had kept and was to keep for the remainder of his days a detailed journal of every day, John Wesley in his own words recorded on a certain day, on a Wednesday, on the 24th of May in 1738 and these are his words, "I went very unwillingly to a meeting of the Moravians on Aldersgate Street and there while listening to one reading from Martin Luther's commentary on the epistle to the Romans, wherein he spoke of the redemption that Christ wrought for the sins of men, I felt my heart strangely warmed and knew that Christ had died for my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." And the rest of his story is that, "That which I first felt, I went forth to preach." And he went forth to preach it and now a message. He had heard from the word of God through a Reformer of the 16th century, another generation, another century, another land, and another servant who was to be used of God to bring revival to his land. We would differ in many respects, many of us from some of his theological interpretations. God used him in his time, in his place, honored his faithfulness as he communicated the message of the Gospel which he had first felt, and it was more than feeling and it was this man who repeated what I read a few moments ago.

Went forth to preach. Found pulpits closed to him. His own father's pulpit closed to him because this was a startling message, an undesired message that was being proclaimed. Everyone remembers he went out and stood on his father's tombstone and said, "This will be my pulpit and if the parishes of the Church of England are closed to me, the world will be my parish." And he preached up and down the British Isles on horseback, studying, writing, preparing sermons, all as he was on horseback. It was almost as if his horse knew the way and took his rider to the place.

Many stories told of highwaymen who accosted him along the way and how he dealt with them. On one occasion, a highwayman sought to rob him and Wesley proceeded to say to him, "How glad I am that I have so little to give you, and how glad I am that what little I have I love so little, and how glad I am that it is you who are robbing me rather than I robbing you, for I would be in grave risk of judgment of God if I were robbing you." And he proceeded to describe the issues at hand to the highwayman who then got off his own horse, gave Wesley some money and rode away, and Wesley thanked God for his provision.

Preserving England from the destruction that France was to know in that same century, God used a man who lived in every decade of the 18th century. He was born 1703. He died in 1791, 88 years in each decade of the century. Died with the stanza of one of his brother's hymn on his lips, "I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me."

This man whom God used said, "God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book." I find in this brief paragraph of Wesley two texts. They are familiar to you. Turn with me to 1 Samuel 21. David is fleeing from Saul. David, having been the occasion for

a murderous jealousy formed in Saul. David having enjoyed a sweet fellowship and friendship with Jonathan, the son of Saul. David concluding the need to flee from Saul, coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest, and in verse 8 of 1 Samuel 21,

8 And David said unto Ahimelech, And is there not here under thine hand spear or sword? for I have neither brought my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste. 9 And the priest said, The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom thou slewest in the valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod: if thou wilt take that, take it: for there is no other save that here. And David said, There is none like that; give it me.

The book of God which Wesley recognized was to be the goal of his life and the tool of his ministry of which he said, "Give me that book," David says, "There is none like it; give it me." There is none like it. There is none like it for its divinity of origin. It is the book of God, revealed by God, using men as the Spirit of God bore them along, moved them. Was it men who wrote the book of God or was it God, the Spirit of God, who wrote the book? And the answer, of course, is yes. God used human agency to accomplish divine purpose. A mystery, this. We will not comprehend it in this world. Unique. None like it. Alone. Revealed by God. The word of God, not the word of man. There is none like it for universality of its message. It is not limited to a people, to a time, to a place, to a nation. It is not limited to just a certain circumstance. It is of universal. It is not just for certain people. The invitation is to all who will, as the Spirit of God moves the heart of men. There is none like it for its power to heal the sickness of the soul. The sin problem, nothing else will settle. And Wesley's remembrance of his heart strangely warmed has been the experience of millions by the grace of God.

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. How do I know of the blood of Jesus? From the blessed book. This unique book that is powerful, it gives life. It does not command deeds. It gives life. It enables and then it requires. Augustine said, "Command what thou wilt," he said to God, "give what thou commandest." If God gives what he commands, if he enables, if he empowers what he requires, the religions of man and all the religions of the world are of man under Satan's inspiration. God is not the author of religion, I think. God gave revelation. He is the God who is. He is the only living God and he has spoken and what he has given is life. He enables us to do what he requires us to do. The religions of the world say, "Do and thou shalt live." The Gospel gives us first life and then tells us what to do, but our doing accomplishes no living. Our doing has no value for eternal life and this Wesley learned as many others.

Not only the power to heal the sin-sickness of the soul but the power to transform the life that follows. What a testimony is a redeemed soul, a changed life, to a world who seeks evidence of reality and truth. A world that has observed hypocrisy and sham so many times, to see something genuine, made possible by the power of the living God and the Spirit of God working through the word of God in a child of God.

None like it for the knowledge of the holy One. The knowledge of the holy One. What would we know of this God apart from this book? The heavens declare the glory of God but the book of God shows me his love. Would I know of his love and of the redemption for my sin but for the book?

None like it for ease of access. Oh, for us that's true. For so many millions of others, for so many centuries of time, in so many parts of the world, that has not been true. Ease of access. Take and read. It costs us so little but I hope you gain some appreciation through the lives of some like William Tyndale and others, of the cost that others have paid that we might be able to have it at so little cost. And it is true and we must constantly guard against the truth that what we obtain so lightly, we tend to regard so poorly. We should as we handle the book of God, be conscious of what it has cost faithful men and realize how very small portions of it in their own language is treasure to peoples who have not known it, and in whose languages it has not formerly been available. Ease of access. God did not put his book in a high place or in a locked cabinet with a spotlight on it to be adored. It is made accessible to those who will know it.

None like it, I say, for the simplicity of its message. Trust. Look. Believe. Take. Come. Lead. Those are simple invitations. Those are one syllable words. They require little of climbing intellectually. The simplicity of the message. Oh, that the fondness of the truths that make the simplicity of the message possible. I do not discount the cost of the Gospel to the Father and the Son, but how simple.

None like it for ease of understanding. He that runneth may read. Remember Psalm 19. Turn there, would you? Psalm 19. There is a beautiful poetic litany in the middle. It begins in verse 7. Psalm 19:7,

7 The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. 8 The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

There is none like it for its sufficiency for life. It contains all things needful for this life and the life to come. Wesley had it right, "Here is knowledge enough for me," he said, "let me be the man of one book."

There is nothing like it for a balm in sorrow and suffering. In times of soul-sorrow and loss and reversal, men do not want the platitudes of men or the poetry of men, they want the solace of that balm of Gilead. There is nothing that is alive as the book of God is alive. There is nothing that speaks to the soul as the word of God to the soul of the sinner. As a balm in times of sorrow.

There is none like it for the certainty of its promises. Which of its promises has failed? Which word of God have you trusted and found wanting? The certainty of its promises. The word of God is true.

None like it for fulfilled prophecy. That which is not yet fulfilled is but history that hasn't happened yet. It is just as sure as that which has. What a marvelous thing it is that God used a heathen emperor, Augustus Caesar, to carry out his own will, Caesar's will, and yet to fulfill the very literal prophetic word of the prophet Micah centuries before, that the Messiah should be born in Bethlehem. Who was responsible for bringing Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem when in that beautiful phrase that only mother's can understand, "The days were accomplished that she should be delivered"? Who brought them to Bethlehem, I say? Was it the Spirit of God? Was it Augustus Caesar? Again, the answer is yes. Again a mystery. Again God using human agency to accomplish divine purpose. The very literal. I'm sure Augustus Caesar never heard of Micah, let alone chapter 5, verse 2, and yet God used him, all ignorant that he was being used, accomplishing his own will, a census to which to base taxes. I say, none like it for fulfilled prophecy.

None like it as a treasury of wisdom. A treasury of wisdom. What is wisdom? What did the philosophers desire to find answers to but the origin, the purpose, the destiny of man and what is the highest good? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going and what's the best way to get there? And what book of man can answer that question? And what answers of man will hold in the end? For a treasury of wisdom, therefore I should be concerned, incidentally, that my children, my grandchildren, your children, your grandchildren, be taught by those who have embraced that treasury of wisdom for the answer they will give to those ultimate questions which are for time and for eternity will be very different from those of the world.

None like it for the principles of life it presents, for every station of life, for every circumstance of life. For the employer and the employee. For the servant and the master. For the sovereign and the subject. For the parent and the child. For the brother, the sister. In every situation, in every circumstance, it has answers.

None like it for the eternity of its endurance. It is the indestructible book. It is the anvil against which all the hammers of man are broken. It will endure. The word of God faileth not. It endureth. It will be fulfilled. It is true. It is righteous altogether.

None like it for the purity of truth it proclaims. It tells it as it is. It glosses not over. It presents the feet of clay, the faults of the faithful, as well as their strengths. It appeals because of its honesty, its integrity, its truthfulness.

None like it for instruction in righteousness. How to live. Who has failed by following its precepts? Who can fail by obeying the word of the living God?

None like it for the sharpness of its conviction. Nathan's finger in David's face, "Thou art the man." It does not mince. It does not dance around. It comes to the point. It tells it in a convicting tone.

Yet none like it for its beauty and restraint of language, and yet directness of word. It gives no uncertain sound. It says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." It says, "Ye must be born again," and it tells us how.

None like it, I say. Unique. This text, David's word, "There is none like that; give it me."

I see a second text in Wesley's word and for just a moment I comment on it. Wesley said, I repeat, "I have thought I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air." I stop there. An arrow through the air. That reminds you, I think also, of the word of James 4 when he asks....would you turn there? James 4. What does the man say if he's persecuted in one text? He flees to another. "Go to now," verse 13. James 4:13,

13 Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: 14 Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. 15 For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.

What is your life? And James answers as the Spirit of God supplies it, "It is even a vapour." Job says something similar in his chapter 7. He says, "For my life is but wind," and wind is not very substantial. Oh, it has consequence but we cannot tell where it listeth and wither it goeth.

Wesley says, "I am passing through life as an arrow through the air." Now it is because life is but a vapor that for Wesley it was so important to know that book. It is because our life is but a fleeting thing that we cannot afford ignorance or long delay in action upon the word of the living God. It is even a vapor. There are not many more insubstantial things that we can imagine than a vapor.

We look at life as a large slice of time, we live a lifetime, we say. I hesitate to get this personal but I'm yielding to the hesitation. It did not bother me to turn 20, it did not bother me to turn 30, I was not even bothered turning 40. Life is supposed to begin then according to somebody's opinion. It bothered me to turn 50 because I teach history and I deal in centuries and a half century had a strongly solid ring to it. That gave me pause and then a decade later, I thought the days of our years are threescore and that itself was sobering, and I turned 60, and now, though it's none of your business, I'm almost through the "and 10." I'm in the last year of that decade and as the old man said, "I can count and if the days of our years are threescore years and 10?" And I say that because it was only yesterday that I felt like some of you young people. I sat in the midst of young people all around me. They were relatively young as this evening began. I was in the midst. I was in the midst of it. I had horns behind me, I had strings in front of me on one side, brass on another side, organ and I had the angelic choir surrounding me, and it was all directed at me and your pastor, and I thought of youth and I thought of how short a time ago it was when I was numbered so, and how quickly the years have passed and the lifetime so

suddenly spent. It can't be imagined by those in their youth and it sounds like old-fogey's talking and they say, "It seems like time has flown."

Well, it's faster than that and Wesley said, "I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air." The longest life in nature is yet but a vapor that appeareth for a little time. We assume there is time ahead but we are reminded to boast not ourselves of tomorrow for we know not what a day may bring forth. God is gracious to give us this moment, to give us this moment to consider the brevity of life. At best the longest life is but a vapor. Insubstantial. Constantly diminishing. Not expected to remain. A vapor is constantly disappearing. It's temporary. It cannot be called back. It often carries an evidence of something else. It often carries a fragrance, a savor of life unto life or of death unto death. And it is created. It is not spontaneous. It does not appear of itself nor has your life been a spontaneous thing, an unplanned thing, an unknown thing to God. You and I are, we don't have, we are immortal souls. We will live somewhere forever.

It was this concern that drove Wesley to say, "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven, how to land safely on that happy shore." And God himself has written it down in a book and this book is accessible to you today. Its truth is unique in all the ways we've remembered. But life is fleeting as an arrow or a vapor through the air. Have you ever appealed to the Spirit of God to apply this book of God, the message of this book to the need of your sin-sick soul? The Spirit of God is eager, is willing, is alive. He uses his word and offers to those who will receive.

There is none like it. May the cry of your soul, saint and sinner, be, "Give me that book."

Speaker: Let's bow our heads in prayer and let's all pray. Let's take a moment before the throne of God to still our hearts. Many questions have been brought to our souls tonight and they demand urgently an answer. I trust this evening that you've come to know John Wesley's Savior. I trust that you've come to know that strange warming of the heart, that glorious transformation of the life, that being born again. You must be born again. I want to ask you tonight to make sure that you're saved. Make sure that you know Christ biblically. And if you are a Christian, my, how this challenges the heart. There is no book like this, yet in Spurgeon's immortal description, "People who hypocritically say they have a Bible, they believe it, but they hardly ever touch it. It sits on a shelf gathering dust and you can take your finger and trace the word 'damnation' in the dust on its cover." There is none like it. Give it me. A man of one book. May God bless his word to our hearts.

If you're not saved, we're to help you. We'd be happy to open the Scriptures and to point you to the Lord Jesus Christ. If you'd like to talk with Dr. Panosian or with me, then let's open the book of God together. I trust you'll seek and find the Savior. He is surely worth finding.

May God bless his word to all our hearts for his name's sake.

Our gracious God and our Father in heaven, we rejoice this evening in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We thank thee that the God of John Wesley is our God. The Holy Spirit who wrought upon his heart savingly still works the same today. We thank thee, our Father, that the power that blessed his ministry is still available to the people of God in the church of Christ today. We thank thee for all that thou didst through the Wesley's and Whitefield and others saved through their ministry, saving England from the catastrophe of revolution and blessing it with the glory of revival. Lord, we thank thee for the memory of it and we made bold to pray, "O Lord, do again in our day a work of such surpassing grace." In this day of a return to rationalism and secularism, in this day of the flourishing of false religion, we pray for a mighty visitation of God and for a glorious demonstration of the power of the Gospel. We believe that thou art our only hope. We cry to thee that thou wilt abundantly hear and answer prayer. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.