

John Wesley

• A Defeated Life •

“About a quarter
before nine...”



(1703-1791)

The fifteenth child in his family, John Wesley was raised in a religiously strict home. He was educated at Oxford and ordained as a deacon in the Anglican Church. In 1735 he left England as a missionary to America to preach to the Indians. However, the complete failure of his missionary efforts, coupled with his inability to overcome sin in his own personal life, caused Wesley to evaluate his actual state before God. He was a defeated man. It was then that he began to realize that he had never had a personal encounter with Christ.

After returning to England, he attended a meeting on May 24, 1738, in which Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans was being read. During the reading his heart was "strangely warmed," and that night Wesley found Christ. From that point on, his outdoor preaching

throughout Great Britain brought thousands to Christ. The following is an excerpt from his journals, dated May 24th and 25th, 1738, describing his experience of finding Christ:

WHAT OCCURRED on Wednesday the 24th, I think best to relate at large, after premising what may make it the better understood. Let him that cannot receive it ask of the Father of lights that He would give more light to him and me.

I believe, till I was about ten years old I had not sinned away that “washing of the Holy Spirit” which was given me in baptism; having been strictly educated and carefully taught that I could only be saved “by universal obedience, by keeping all the commandments of God,” in the meaning of which I was diligently instructed. And those instructions, so far as they respected outward duties and sins, I gladly received and often thought of. But all that was said to me of inward obedience or holiness I neither understood nor remembered. So that I was indeed as ignorant of the true meaning of the law as I was of the gospel of Christ.

The next six or seven years were spent at school; where, outward restraints being removed, I was much more negligent than before, even of outward duties, and almost continually guilty of outward sins, which I knew to be such, though they were not scandalous in the eye of

the world. However, I still read the Scriptures, and said my prayers morning and evening. And what I now hoped to be saved by was (1) not being so bad as other people; (2) having still a kindness for religion; and (3) reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers.

Being removed to the University for five years, I still said my prayers both in public and in private, and read, with the Scriptures, several other books of religion, especially comments on the New Testament. Yet I had not all this while so much as a notion of inward holiness; nay, went on habitually, and for the most part very contentedly, in some or other known sin: indeed, with some intermission and short struggles, especially before and after the Holy Communion, which I was obliged to receive three times a year. I cannot well tell what I hoped to be saved by now, when I was continually sinning against that little light I had; unless by those transient fits of what many divines taught me to call repentance.

When I was about twenty-two, my father pressed me to enter into holy orders. At the same time, the providence of God directing me to Kempis's *Christian Pattern*, I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions. I was, however, very angry at Kempis for being too strict; though I read him only in Dean Stanhope's translation. Yet I had frequently much sensible comfort in reading him, such as I was an utter

stranger to before; and meeting likewise with a religious friend, which I never had till now, I began to alter the whole form of my conversation, and to set in earnest upon a new life. I set apart an hour or two a day for religious retirement. I took holy communion every week. I watched against all sin, whether in word or deed. I began to aim at, and pray for, inward holiness. So that now, “doing so much, and living so good a life,” I doubted not but I was a good Christian....

In 1730 I began visiting the prisons; assisting the poor and sick in town; and doing what other good I could, by my presence or my little fortune, to the bodies and souls of all men. To this end I abridged myself of all superfluities, and many that are called necessaries of life.... Yet when, after continuing some years in this course, I apprehended myself to be near death, I could not find that all this gave me any comfort or any assurance of acceptance with God. At this I was then not a little surprised; not imagining I had been all this time building on the sand, nor considering that “other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid” by God, “even Christ Jesus.”

Soon after, a contemplative man convinced me still more than I was convinced before, that outward works are nothing, being alone; and in several conversations instructed me how to pursue inward holiness, or a union of the soul with God. But even of his instructions (though I then received them as the words of God) I cannot but

now observe (1) that he spoke so incautiously against trusting in outward works, that he discouraged me from doing them at all; (2) that he recommended (as it were, to supply what was wanting in them) *mental prayer*, and the like exercises, as the most effectual means of purifying the soul and uniting it with God. Now these were, in truth, as much my own works as visiting the sick or clothing the naked; and the union with God thus pursued was as really my own righteousness as any I had before pursued under another name.

In this refined way of trusting to my own works and my own righteousness (so zealously inculcated by the Mystic writers), I dragged on heavily, finding no comfort or help therein till the time of my leaving England. On shipboard, however, I was again active in outward works; where it pleased God of His free mercy to give me twenty-six of the Moravian brethren for companions, who endeavored to show me “a more excellent way.” But I understood it not at first. I was too learned and too wise. So that it seemed foolishness unto me. And I continued preaching, and following after, and trusting in, that righteousness whereby no flesh can be justified.

All the time I was at Savannah [Georgia], I was thus beating the air. Being ignorant of the righteousness of Christ, which, by a living faith in Him, brings salvation “to every one that believes,” I sought to establish my own righteousness; and so labored in the fire all my days. I

was now properly “under the law.” I knew that the law of God was spiritual; I consented to it that it was good. Yea, I delighted in it, after the inner man. Yet was I carnal, sold under sin. Every day was I constrained to cry out, “What I do, I allow not: for what I would, I do not; but what I hate, that I do. To will is indeed present with me: but how to perform that which is good, I find not. For the good which I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. I find a law, that when I would do good, evil is present with me: even the law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and still bringing me into captivity to the law of sin.”

In this vile, abject state of bondage to sin, I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering. Before, I had willingly served sin; now it was unwillingly, but still I served it. I fell, and rose, and fell again. Sometimes I was overcome, and in heaviness; sometimes I overcame, and was in joy. For as in the former state I had some foretastes of the terrors of the law; so had I in this, of the comforts of the gospel. During this whole struggle between nature and grace, which had now continued more than ten years, I had many remarkable returns to prayer, especially when I was in trouble; I had many sensible comforts, which are indeed no other than short anticipations of the life of faith. But I was still “under the law,” not “under grace” (the state most who are called Christians are content to live and die in); for I was only striving with, not

freed from, sin. Neither had I the witness of the Spirit with my spirit, and indeed could not; for I “sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law.”

In my return to England, January 1738, being in imminent danger of death, and very uneasy on that account, I was strongly convinced that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief; and that the gaining of a true, living faith was the “one thing needful” for me. But still I fixed not this faith on its right object: I meant only faith in God, not faith in or through Christ. Again, I knew not that I was wholly void of this faith; but only thought I had not enough of it. So that when Peter Böhler, whom God prepared for me as soon as I came to London, affirmed of true faith in Christ (which is but one) that it had those two fruits inseparably attending it, “dominion over sin and constant peace from a sense of forgiveness,” I was quite amazed, and looked upon it as a new gospel. If this was so, it was clear I had not faith. But I was not willing to be convinced of this. Therefore I disputed with all my might, and labored to prove that faith might be where these were not: for all the Scriptures relating to this I had been long since taught to construe away; and to call all “Presbyterians” who spoke otherwise. Besides, I well saw no one could, in the nature of things, have such a sense of forgiveness, and not *feel* it. But I felt it not. If, then, there was no faith without this, all my pretensions to faith dropped at once.

When I met Peter Böhler again, he consented to put the dispute upon the issue which I desired, namely, Scripture and experience. I first consulted the Scripture. But when I set aside the glosses of men, and simply considered the words of God, comparing them together, endeavoring to illustrate the obscure by the plainer passages, I found they all made against me, and was forced to retreat to my last hold, “that experience would never agree with the *literal interpretation* of those Scriptures. Nor could I therefore allow it to be true, till I found some living witnesses of it.” He replied, he could show me such at any time; if I desired it, the next day. And accordingly the next day he came again with three others, all of whom testified of their own personal experience, that a true living faith in Christ is inseparable from a sense of pardon for all past and freedom from all present sins. They added with one mouth that this faith was the gift, the free gift of God; and that He would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it. I was now thoroughly convinced; and, by the grace of God, I resolved to seek it unto the end (1) by absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon *my own* works or righteousness; on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up; (2) by adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace, continual prayer for this very thing, justifying,

saving faith, a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for *me*; a trust in Him, as *my* Christ, as *my* sole justification, sanctification, and redemption.

I continued thus to seek it (though with strange indifference, dullness, and coldness, and unusually frequent relapses into sin) till Wednesday, May 24. I think it was about five this morning that I opened my Testament on those words, “There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that you should be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). Just as I went out, I opened it again on those words, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” In the afternoon I was asked to go to St. Paul’s. The anthem was, “Out of the deep have I called unto You, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice. O let Your ears consider well the voice of my complaint. If You, Lord, will be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who may abide it? For there is mercy with You; therefore shall You be feared. O Israel, trust in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his sins.”

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone

for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, “This cannot be faith; for where is your joy?” Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes gives, sometimes withholds them, according to the counsels of His own will.

After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He “sent me help from His holy place.” And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror.¹



Perhaps you have a personal history similar to John Wesley’s — outwardly you have lived a religious life,

but inwardly you have discovered that you don't have the ability to overcome sin. You are a defeated person in light of what you know you should be. What you need to hear is what Wesley heard the night he found Christ. He was listening to Luther's words that describe the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ. The following is the part of Luther's preface referred to by Wesley:

Faith is a divine work in us, which transforms us, gives us a new birth out of God (John 1:13), slays the old Adam, makes us altogether different men in heart, affection, mind, and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, it is a living, energetic, active, mighty thing, this faith! It cannot but do good unceasingly. There is no question asked whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked the works have been done, and there is a continuous doing of them. But any person not doing such works is without faith. He is groping in the dark, looking for faith and good works, and knows neither what faith is nor what good works are, although he indulges in a lot of twaddle and nonsense concerning faith and good works.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in the grace of God, of such assurance that it would risk a thousand deaths. This confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes a person happy, bold, and full of gladness in his relation to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit is doing this in the believer. Hence it is that a

person, without constraint, becomes willing and enthusiastic to do good to everybody, to serve everybody, to suffer all manner of afflictions, from love of God and to the praise of Him who has extended such grace to him. Accordingly, it is impossible to separate works from faith, just as impossible as it is to separate the power to burn and shine from fire. Accordingly, beware of your own false thoughts and of idle talkers, who pretend great wisdom for discerning faith and good works and yet are the greatest fools. Pray God that He may create faith in you; otherwise you will be without faith forever and aye, no matter what you may plan and do.²

Your defeated life can turn into victory now by trusting in Christ *alone* for your salvation. Acts 4:12 says, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is *none* other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Turn from your own works and striving. Give up your self-effort and turn this hour to Christ alone for the assurance of your salvation. Wesley could recall that it was “about a quarter before nine.” As you are opening to Christ now, mark the time of your “new birth.”