

# George Whitefield

## • A Religious Life •

“A ray of divine light...darted in upon my soul.”



(1714-1770)

*A*s a teenager, George Whitefield desired to live a religious and serious life. He engaged in numerous religious exercises such as fasting, praying regularly, attending public worship, and abstaining from worldly pleasures. However, it was not until Charles Wesley gave him Henry Scougal's book, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, that he saw that he had never personally found Christ. A ray of divine light darted in upon his soul when he realized that “true religion was union of the soul with God, and Christ formed within us.”<sup>1</sup>

After this experience, Whitefield became one of the most effective preachers of the gospel that the church has known. His trips to America were largely responsible for the first Great Awakening, which took place in the mid-eighteenth century. The following is Whitefield's testi-

*mony about how he found Christ. It is taken from his journal and a sermon he preached later in his life.*

**B**EING NOW near the seventeenth year of my age, I was resolved to prepare myself for the holy Sacrament, which I received on Christmas Day. I began now to be more and more watchful over my thoughts, words, and actions. I kept the following Lent, fasting Wednesday and Friday thirty-six hours together. My evenings, when I was done waiting upon my mother, were generally spent in acts of devotion, reading *Drelincourt on Death*, and other practical books, and I constantly went to public worship twice a day. Being now an upperclassman, by God's help I made some reformation among my schoolfellows. I was very diligent in reading and learning the classics, and in studying my Greek Testament, but was not yet convinced of the absolute unlawfulness of playing cards and of reading and seeing plays, though I began to have some scruples about it.

Near this time I dreamed that I was to see God on Mount Sinai, but was afraid to meet Him. This made a great impression upon me; and a gentlewoman to whom I told it, said, "George, this is a call from God."

Still I grew more serious after this dream; but yet hypocrisy crept into every action. As once I affected to look more dashing, I now strove to appear more grave

than I really was. However, an uncommon concern and alteration was visible in my behavior, and I often used to find fault with the lightness of others.

One night, as I was going on an errand for my mother, an unaccountable but very strong impression was made upon my heart that I should preach quickly. When I came home, I innocently told my mother what had happened to me; but she, like Joseph's parents, when he told them his dream, turned short upon me, crying out, "What does the boy mean? I pray thee hold thy tongue," or something to that purpose. God has since shown her from Whom that impression came.

For a year I went on in a round of duties, receiving the Sacrament monthly, fasting frequently, attending constantly on public worship, and praying often more than twice a day in private. One of my brothers used to tell me, he feared this would not hold long, and that I would forget all when I came to Oxford. This caution did me much service, for it set me upon praying for perseverance; and, under God, the preparation I made in the country was a preservative against the manifold temptations which beset me at my first coming to that seat of learning.

Being now near eighteen years old, it was judged proper for me to go to the University. God had sweetly prepared my way. Some friends of mine recommended me to the Master of Pembroke College. Another friend

loaned me 10 pounds, which I have since repaid, to defray the first expense of entering; and the Master, contrary to all expectations, admitted me as a servitor immediately.

Soon after my admission I went and resided, and found my having been accustomed to a public-house [inn] was now of service to me. For many of the servitors being sick at my first coming up, by my diligent and ready attendance, I found favor with the gentlemen so much, that many, who had it in their power, chose me to be their servitor.

This much lessened my expense; and indeed, God was so gracious, that with the profits of my service, and some little presents given to me by my kind tutor, for almost the first three years I did not require from my family more than 24 pounds for expenses. And it has often grieved my soul to see so many young students spending their substance in extravagant living, and thereby entirely unfitting themselves for the pursuing of their studies.

I had not been long at the University, before I found the benefit of the foundation I had laid in the country for a holy life. I was quickly invited to join in their excess of riot with several who slept in the same room. God, in answer to previous prayers, gave me grace to withstand them; and once in particular, it being cold, my limbs were so numb by sitting alone in my study, because I would not go out among them, that I could scarcely sleep all

night. But I soon found the benefit of not yielding: for when they perceived they could not prevail, they left me alone as a singular odd fellow.

All this while I was not fully convicted of the sin of playing cards and reading plays, till God on a fast-day was pleased to convince me. For, taking a play, to read a passage out of it to a friend, God struck my heart with such power, that I was obliged to lay it down again; and, blessed be His Name, I have not read any such book since.

Before I went to the University, I met with Mr. Law's *Serious Call to a Devout Life*, but did not have the money to purchase it. Soon after my coming up to the University, seeing a small edition of it in a friend's hand, I soon procured it. God worked powerfully upon my soul, as He has since upon many others, by that book and Mr. Law's other excellent treatise on *Christian Perfection*.

I now began to pray and sing psalms three times every day, besides morning and evening, and to fast every Friday, and to receive the Sacrament at a parish church near our college, and at the castle, where the despised Methodists used to receive it once a month. The young men so called were then much talked of at Oxford. I had heard of, and loved them before I came to the University; and so strenuously defended them when I heard them reviled by the students, that they began to think that I also in time should be one of them.

For more than a year my soul longed to be acquainted

with some of them, and I was strongly pressed to follow their good example, when I saw them go through a ridiculing crowd to receive the Holy Eucharist at St. Mary's. The time came when God was pleased to open a door. It happened that a poor woman in one of the workhouses had attempted to cut her throat, but was happily prevented. Upon hearing of this, and knowing that both the Mr. Wesleys [Charles and John] were ready to every good work, I sent a poor apple-woman of our college to inform Mr. Charles Wesley of it, charging her not to tell who sent her. She went; but, contrary to my orders, told my name. He having heard of my coming to the castle and a parish-church Sacrament, and having met me frequently walking by myself, followed the woman when she left and sent an invitation to me by her, to come to breakfast with him the next morning.

I thankfully embraced the opportunity; and, blessed be God! it was one of the most profitable visits I ever had in my life. My soul, at that time, was athirst for some spiritual friends to lift up my hands when they hung down, and to strengthen my feeble knees. He soon discovered it, and, like a wise winner of souls, made all his discourses tend that way. And when he had put into my hands Professor Francke's treatise *Against the Fear of Man*, and a book entitled *The Country Parson's Advice to His Parishioners* (the last of which was wonderfully blessed to my soul) I took my leave.

In a short time he let me have another book entitled *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*; and though I had fasted, watched and prayed, and received the Sacrament so long, yet I never knew what true religion was, till God sent me that excellent treatise by the hands of my never-to-be-forgotten friend [Charles Wesley].

At my first reading it, I wondered what the author meant by saying, “That some falsely placed religion in going to church, doing hurt to no one, being constant in the duties of the closet, and now and then reaching out their hands to give alms to their poor neighbors.” “Alas!” thought I, “if this be not true religion, what is?” God soon showed me; for in reading a few lines further, that “true religion was union of the soul with God, and Christ formed within us,” a ray of divine light was instantaneously darted in upon my soul, and from that moment, but not till then, did I know that I must be a new creature.

Upon this, like the woman of Samaria, when Christ revealed Himself to her at the well, I had no rest in my soul till I wrote letters to my relatives, telling them there was such a thing as the new birth. I imagined they would have gladly received it. But, alas! my words seemed to them as idle tales. They thought that I was beside myself, and by their letters, confirmed me in the resolutions I had taken not to go down into the country, but continue where I was, so that, by any means the good work which God had begun in my soul should not be made of none effect.

From time to time Mr. Wesley permitted me to come unto him, and instructed me as I was able to bear it. By degrees he introduced me to the rest of his Christian brethren. They built me up daily in the knowledge and fear of God, and taught me to endure hardness like a good soldier of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

*Much later in his life, in a sermon of 1769, Whitefield again bore witness to the same great experience:*

I must bear testimony to my old friend Mr. Charles Wesley. He put a book into my hands called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, whereby God showed me that I must be born again or be damned. I know the place: it may perhaps be superstitious, but whenever I go to Oxford I cannot help running to the spot where Jesus Christ first revealed Himself to me, and gave me the new birth. I learned that a man may go to church, say his prayers, receive the Sacrament, and yet not be a Christian. How did my heart rise and shudder like a poor man that is afraid to look into his ledger lest he should find himself a bankrupt. "Shall I burn this book? Shall I throw it down? or shall I search it?" I did search it; and, holding the book in my hand, thus addressed the God of heaven and earth: "Lord, if I am not a Christian, for Jesus Christ's sake show me what Christianity is, that I may not be damned at last." I read a little further, and discovered that they who know anything of religion

know it is a vital union with the Son of God — Christ formed in the heart. O what a ray of divine life did then break in upon my soul!

I began writing to all my brethren and to my sisters. I talked to the students as they came into my room. I laid aside all trifling conversation. I put all trifling books away, and was determined to study to be a saint, and then to be a scholar. From that moment God has been carrying on His blessed work in my soul. I am now fifty-five years of age, and shall leave you in a few days; but I tell you, my brethren, I am more and more convinced that this is the truth of God, and that without it you can never be saved by Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>



It is not uncommon for a moral person like George Whitefield, who mistakenly places his hope in mere religious practices, to one day suddenly discover that what pleases God is not man's efforts, but a new birth that brings one into union with Christ. This was the apostle Paul's testimony in Galatians 1:14-16: <sup>14</sup>“And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. <sup>15</sup>But when *it pleased God*, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, <sup>16</sup>*to reveal His Son in me ...*”

If you are a person striving religiously within yourself to please God, you need to see that what God wants from you is that you receive Christ, be joined to Him, and have a new birth now. The way for this to happen to you is given clearly in John 1:12-13: <sup>12</sup>“But as many as *received Him*, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” To receive Christ and believe in His name is a simple act of faith from your heart and with your mouth. Just open your heart and call upon His name — Lord Jesus. You receive Him the moment you open and call. This gives the Lord the way to actually come into you so that you might be born of God and be in union with Him. “The one who joins himself to the Lord is *one spirit* with Him” (1 Cor. 6:17, NASV). As soon as you take this step, a ray of divine light will instantaneously dart in upon your soul, for Romans 8:16 tells us, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that *we are* children of God.”