

John Wesley - Evangelist: Chapter 12

The Closing Scenes

Wesley's work was nearly at an end when the first light of the year 1791 broke upon him. We have no record of the watch-night service, in which, as usual, the mercies of the year were acknowledged, with praise and thanksgiving; its shortcomings and sins confessed, and the new year anticipated with fervent prayer; or of the Covenant and Sacramental services in which, with its leader at its head, the Society sought to prepare itself for the toils and responsibilities of the future.

We learn from various sources that Wesley was very feeble, though he wrote, in January, that his health for four days had been better than for several months; yet he was compelled to own, 'Time has shaken me by the hand, and death is not far behind.' It was in keeping with his whole previous life for him to say, 'I hope I shall not live to be useless.' So late as February he declared his purpose, if God permit, to visit Gloucester, Worcester, and Stourport, in March,' and he actually made arrangements for his usual visit to Bristol, and then to the North, his chaise being sent before him to Bristol for this purpose. One of his last letters was written on February 19 to Mrs. Knapp, a devoted saint of Worcester, in which he says:

'London, February 19, 1791.

' My Dear Suky,

'As the state of my health is exceedingly wavering, and waxes worse, I cannot yet lay down my plans for my future journeys. Indeed, I propose, if God permit, to set out for Bristol on the 28th instant; but how much further I shall be able to go, I cannot yet determine. If I am pretty well, I hope to be at Worcester about the 22nd of March. To find you and yours in health of body and mind will be a great pleasure to,

'My dear Suky, yours affectionately,

'J. WESLEY.'

But all these intentions were frustrated. On Thursday he preached at Lambeth; and on Friday he read and wrote through the day, preaching at Chelsea in the evening. On the following Sunday he was unable to preach, and much of the day was spent in sleep. On Monday his strength rallied, and, though urged not to do so, he fulfilled an engagement to dine at Twickenham. He was accompanied thither by his niece, Miss Sarah Wesley, and Miss Ritchie, who has preserved a minute record of these last days. On his way he called on Lady Mary Fitzgerald, and 'conversed and prayed most sweetly.' On Tuesday he preached at City Road — his last sermon there. Thus closed his public ministry among his people. All these services were conducted in great weakness. His venerable appearance in the Autumn of the following year is picturesquely described by Henry Crabbe Robinson, in the following words :— 'It was, I believe, in October, 1790, that I heard John Wesley in the great round meeting-house of Colchester. He stood in a wide pulpit, and on each side of him stood a minister, and the two held him up, having their hands under his armpits. His feeble voice was barely audible; but his reverend countenance, especially his long white locks, formed a picture never to be forgotten. There was a vast crowd of lovers and admirers. It was for the most part a pantomime, but the pantomime went to the heart. Of the kind, I never saw anything comparable to it in after life.'

On Wednesday, the 23rd, he visited a gentleman at Leatherhead, and preached in his dining-room, on Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near.' This was the last of the long series, He preached no more. 'On that day fell from his dying grasp a trumpet of the truth which had sounded the everlasting gospel oftener, and more effectually, than that of any other man for sixteen hundred years It has been admitted that Whitefield preached more eloquently, with few exceptions to larger assemblies, and travelled more extensively (though not more miles) than Wesley, within the same limits of time; but Wesley survived him more than twenty years, and his power has been more productive and permanent. Whitefield preached eighteen thousand sermons, more than ten a week, for his thirty-two years of ministerial life. Wesley preached forty-two thousand, after his return from Georgia; more than fifteen a week. His public life stands out in the history of the world unquestionably pre-eminent in religious labours above that of any other man since the apostolic age. The following day he spent with his friend and executor, Mr. Wolff, at Balham, where he wrote his final letter. It was addressed to the great antislavery advocate, William Wilberforce; and is dated:

'London, February 24, 1791.

'My Dear-Sir,

Unless the Divine power has raised you up to be as Athanasius, contra mundum, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise, in opposing the execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised

you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils; but, if God be for you who can be against you Are all of them together stronger than God O, "be not weary in well doing." Go on, in the name of God, and in the power of His 'might, till even American 'slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away before it.

'Reading this morning a tract, wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance,—that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a law, in our colonies, that the oath of a black, against a white, goes for nothing. What villainy is this!

That He who has guided you, from your youth up, may continue to strengthen you in this and all things, is the prayer of, dear sir,

'Your affectionate servant,

'John Wesley.'

The next day he was brought home to City Road. He went upstairs, and requested that, for half an hour, he should be left alone; after which time his faithful friend, Joseph Bradford, found him so unwell that he sent for his physician, Dr. Whitehead. He lingered in much weakness for one week, often singing or repeating snatches of his brother's or Dr. Watts's hymns, or passages of the Holy Scriptures, which he had so long and so freely proclaimed; and again and again exclaiming, in the joy of his faith, 'The best of all is, God is with us.' Then, at length, about nine o'clock in the morning of March 2, 1791, in the presence of a few of his dearest friends, representatives of his beloved people, and while they were commending him to God in silent prayer—Joseph Bradford, one of his itinerant helpers, saying, 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the heir of glory shall come in'—with a simple 'Farewell' upon his lips, John Wesley, in the eighty-eighth year of his age, passed from the scene of his great evangelistic toils on earth to the joy of his everlasting reward.

The little company rose in tears, sang a hymn, knelt again in prayer, and then in sorrow quitted the solemn and painful scene. The attempted work is done—imperfectly, it is acknowledged. The abundance of available material, while making it a comparatively easy task to compile a 'Life,' presents a corresponding difficulty in the necessary exclusion of so much interesting matter.

Two objects have been kept steadily in view throughout the progress of the foregoing pages. The first has been to give prominence to the preparation—divine and human—of a distinguished agent of God, obviously raised up to bring about, in a very remarkable way, the spiritual awakening of this kingdom; possibly, and as many believe, to save it from a descent into a deeper gloom, if not into a dreadful catastrophe.

A second object in view has been to bring into relief the courage, the fidelity, but more particularly the unbroken continuity of effort, which characterized Wesley's evangelistic labours. Many are the quibbling—and, perhaps, some just—detractions made by captious or uninstructed critics, from the dignity and grandeur of Wesley's life and work. But a little light only is needed to enable an unbiassed observer to see in him a fitting agent of a great purpose, and a noble illustration of undistracted devotion to a high calling.

It is not suggested that the work begun by Wesley and his coadjutors—for they must not be separated—was completed by them. The very nature of that work demands that succeeding agencies must carry it forward in following years, even to the end of time. It may be said that the work begun in Wesley's time was not a new work. His was the work of revival. He created nothing. He had no new truth to proclaim, but an old one. In this respect he differed from Luther as a spiritual reformer, inasmuch as Luther condemned the existing faith of the Church, and sought its correction. Wesley, on the other hand, adhered to his Church's teaching, as it was presented in her authoritative writings, her formularies, and her traditions, and he strove to arouse attention to it. There was a marked unity and simplicity in Wesley's doings. He viewed all men in the light of his own experience. He had felt the need of a gospel; he had sought and found it. He had tried to make himself righteous by rules and performances, and he failed. He had by the same method tried to make others so, with similar results. He baptized children by trine immersion; he administered the Lord's Supper weekly, and 'many such like things' he did; but they did not change the heart; they did not impart a new life. Never could man say with greater truthfulness, 'But I of means have made my boast.' Yet, with all the corrective measures, with all the rigours of a stern self-discipline, which he brought to bear on his own life, he still had felt a great lack, an unsatisfied longing. That lack was supplied in the little sanctuary in Aldersgate. He was thenceforward no longer a theorist. He had proved experimentally the efficacy of this means of renewal. He had tested it by the severest test possible to him—its power to satisfy the deepest demands of his own life. He felt the power of a new life imparted to him in response to faith.

He now worked under entirely new conditions. When he had proved the gospel salvation, he gave up seeking to make men better by rules, and he tried the gospel, and found it to be as effectual in them as in himself. He said, 'The drunkard is become sober, the immoral chaste.' Homes, as well as lives, were changed when the gospel new life came into them. The outward forms now had a new purpose to serve—namely, to cultivate and nourish the life they could not impart. From these positions he never departed. This is the great lesson of Wesley's life.

The problem of the world's regeneration was first wrought out within the sphere of his own experience. After his own change, when he was able to appreciate his former blindness, sinfulness; and need, he was able also to estimate the needs, the blindness, and the sinfulness of others. To open the eyes of men born blind like himself, to lead them to fountains where he himself had washed, was the Work to which his life henceforth was consecrated, as these pages are designed to show. He had a distinct and clear idea of what every man needed. It was not a change of opinion, but a change of life—a new life. In his view, all were spiritually dead until they received the gospel salvation. That salvation he believed was provided for all; and it was offered to all: every one was capable of receiving it; and it was the duty of every one to accept it. These were his primary truths. On these he spent his strength to the end; and the world has seen and rejoiced in the fruit thereof. These same truths the world needs to-day, and will ever need, as each successive generation of men arises on the face of the earth.