

Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It sermon series***“A Crisis of Faith”***[Romans 8:28](#)

We are in the middle of a sermon series titled, Revival. Through this series, we are learning about the life, beliefs, and spiritual practices of John Wesley, who led the Methodist movement in England during the 18th century. This spirit of revival, which was at the core of the Methodist movement, crossed the Atlantic Ocean and spread across the American colonies as well. Through our study, we seek to spark a revival of faith in our hearts and in the life of our church. During the last two Sundays, we learned about Wesley’s family background as well as the years of his education, ordination, and teaching career at Oxford University. Today, we will review the years Wesley spent in the American colonies and the impact this ministry experience made on his future.

Not like most people on the campus of Oxford University, John and his brother Charles, were serious about faith matters. With a couple of students who shared their spiritual concerns and interests, they created a small group that met every week for prayer, Bible study, worship, Holy Communion, and mission projects. They were so serious and methodical in their pursuit of spiritual growth that their fellow students and professors began calling their gatherings the Holy Club and labeled them as Methodists, an insult which eventually became our name! Through their personal and group devotions and commitment to spiritual disciplines, the members of the Holy Club rigorously sought to be holy in all of their thoughts, words, and actions, and to glorify God in all they did.

In 1732, the British established a new colony in America and named it Georgia in honor of King George II. Responding to a need for some clergy to serve the new community, John Wesley volunteered to go. He was asked to serve as a minister to the English settlers and a missionary to the native inhabitants of Georgia. He convinced his younger brother, Charles, to join him on this mission.

When he boarded a ship bound for Georgia in the month of October, 1735, along with over 100 other English colonists, John Wesley was already a very pious man. But, despite all his efforts to be holy, John felt something was still missing in him. Before his journey to Georgia, he wrote in his diary that his main purpose of going to America was to save his own soul.

Traveling to America on a ship was quite a challenge for John. He had always feared the sea from his youth, and this was his first time traveling on a ship. During the three-month long journey, the ship encountered life-threatening storms that terrified him. In the midst of one of those storms, Wesley witnessed something incredible.

Among the passengers, there were about two dozen Moravians. One night, the ship was struck by a particularly bad storm. A huge wave engulfed the ship and water began pouring in. All the English people on board, including John, panicked and began to scream in terror. But, the Moravians, both men and women, adults and children, were calmly praying and singing together, untroubled by the storm.

John was deeply affected by what he saw. Perplexed by the response the Moravians had to the storm, he began to wonder: What gave the Moravians such confidence in the face of death? How could they stay calm and even sing when all others were frozen in terror? John knew, whatever they had, he did not have. Shaken by this realization, he began to question his faith. That night, he wrote in his journal about the storm and his encounter with the Moravians. Little did he realize that this would be just the beginning of a crisis of faith that he would continue to experience in his new ministry field in Georgia.

In the Bible, we find several stories that show us how storms play a part in great revivals of faith. Noah, Jonah, Peter, and Paul, they all had encounters with the Holy in the midst of storms. Martin Luther, the pioneer of Protestantism, was led to become a monk through a storm. And the storms he faced at sea and in Georgia prepared John Wesley for his conversion experience.

In our lives, the storms may not be literal, but they can be just as terrifying. In my own life, the many moves my family made during the years of my childhood and youth were like violent storms to me. Each of the moves seemed to strike and blow my life off course as I had to say goodbyes to my newly-made friends and pack my belongings almost every other year. But, the storms pushed me toward new places and new people and led me to the place where I am today. In my adult life, the storms came in the form of financial hardships, cultural challenges, relational difficulties, and struggles in ministry. I remember the sleepless nights and moments of vulnerability, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. But, I am convinced that the storms have shaped and molded me. They have helped me become who I am now.

Friends, sometimes we face the tragedies and challenges we call the storms of life. We can be hurt and wounded by them. Yet, they will never destroy us as long as we do not allow them. When we place them in God's hands, by the grace of God, they become part of the stories that define who we are as people of faith. Rewritten by the hands of God, they become new stories that tell the world about new life and new possibilities.

Going back to Wesley's story, finally, the ship arrived in America. John was appointed as a missionary in Savannah, Georgia. And, he started his ministry with a great ambition, pursuing holiness more passionately than ever before and preaching to the residents of Savannah. The geographical, linguistic, and cultural diversity of his parish was too much for one man. But, John Wesley was determined to minister to all and convert as many as he could. His typical Sunday went like this:

5:00 - 6:30 a.m. English prayers
9:00 -10:00 a.m. Italian prayers
10:30 a.m. -12:30 p.m. English Communion and Service
1:00 - 2:00 p.m. French Prayers
2:00 - 3:00 p.m. Catechism of Children
3:00 - 4:00 p.m. English prayers

After a full day of leading prayer services in different languages, and teaching children, John joined the Moravians in their evening gatherings.

Some people embraced the message he preached and the spiritual practices he promoted. But, to most residents of Savannah, Wesley's ideals were too much. Conflicts rose even among his followers when Wesley began to institute and enforce strict rules. For example, John started a daily 5 a.m. prayer service and ruled that only those who attended the daily prayer service would be allowed to receive Holy Communion. He asked his followers to fast twice a week - on Wednesdays and Fridays.

But, the strict methods of living did not have much practical value to the residents of Savannah - the native Indians and the collection of colonists who were struggling to settle down. Wesley wrote in his diary what one of his parishioners had said to him: "I like nothing you do... Indeed there is neither man nor woman in the town who minds a word you say. And so you may preach long enough, but nobody will come to hear you."

Can you imagine how hurtful and discouraging these words were to John Wesley, who was trying so hard to help his parishioners to lead a life of holiness, to become all-together Christians? But, soon, another, even bigger trouble came his way from an entirely different direction.

There was a young woman named Sophia Hopkey in one of the small groups John Wesley was leading. John had met her and her family on his travel to America. There was mutual attraction between the two, and they continued to see each other. Being at the right age to be married, Sophia was looking for a future husband. With his great family and educational background, attractive features, charismatic personality, and godly lifestyle, John seemed to be a perfect match for her.

However, John was so dedicated to his ministry, that he was not interested in marriage. And, he naively believed that he could continue his spiritual and platonic relationship with Sophia because she would remain single, too. When she realized that John would never propose to her, Sophia accepted the advances of another man, while she continued to see John. And she eventually became engaged to the man.

When he found out about her engagement, John was heartbroken. He was furious by the fact that Sophia was seeing another man while she was meeting with him for spiritual guidance and encouragement. When Sophia married her fiancé, Wesley found it difficult to be her pastor any longer. He even refused to give her and her husband the Holy Communion during worship.

Soon, charges against Wesley were filed by the newly-wed couple for defamation of character. While the case dragged on in court for the next several months, the young pastor lost not only his parishioners but also his reputation among the people of Savannah. Finally, a couple of days before Christmas, 1737, Wesley left Georgia and went back to England a defeated man. Only two years and two months after he had left his home country with a burning passion for the mission to America, he returned as a complete failure.

When he came back home with his heart and spirit broken, Wesley did not know what kind of impact his complete failure in his ministry in America would have upon his future. His experience of miserable failure and embarrassment led him to a place of profound spiritual awakening and conviction that ignited his zeal for the church revival movement.

That's what Paul says in today's scripture as we read with one voice earlier: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28)

God will take our failures, our rejections, our mistakes, our shames, our regrets, our guilts, our disappointments, our discouragements and use them for good, only if we place them in God's hands, only if we allow it, only if we admit our messes and stop blaming others for them.

May 24th, 1738, was the day when Wesley experienced it for himself. He wrote in his journal about the special experience that changed him and the world forever:

In the evening, I went ever 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....

Born into a devout Christian family, Wesley had been a Christian his whole life. With great devotion, he had pursued to have the assurance of God's grace and salvation. But, that night, Wesley experienced it in a totally new way. The grace of God came to him neither through his efforts nor his pious devotion, but through Jesus Christ. In the midst of his brokenness and his failures, it was God's grace which came to him, and for the first time, strangely warmed his heart.

Next week, we will learn more about this understanding of God's grace Wesley experienced and taught.