

## John Wesley the Methodist

### Chapter XIX - The Passing of John Wesley

An Active Octogenarian.--Welcomed in Ireland.--Triumphal Progresses. --" I do not Lack for Labor."--Last Open-air Sermon.--The Last Text.--A Last Letter.--" The Best of All is, God is with Us !"

ON the verge of fourscore Wesley wrote: "I entered into my eightieth year, but, blessed be God, my time is not labor and sorrow. I find no more pain nor bodily infirmities than at five-and-twenty. This I still impute (1) to the power of God, fitting me for what he calls me to; (2) to my still traveling four or five thousand miles a year; (3) to my sleeping, night or day, whenever I want it; (4) to my rising at a set hour; and (5) to my constant preaching, particularly in the morning.." To these he added, "Lastly, evenness of temper. I feel and grieve, but, by the grace of God, I fret at nothing. But still, ' the help that is done upon earth he doeth it himself.' And this he doeth in answer to many prayers."

It was not until he was eighty-five that he began to feel that he was not "quite so agile as in times past," and that his sight was "a little decayed." But he did not even then cease to labor, and his cheerfulness was irrepressible.

The days of persecution for him were past, and he was crowned with honor wherever he went. A year after his brother's death he paid his last visit to Ireland, where he remained for nearly four months. The mayors of Dublin and Cork accorded him civic honors, and he was everywhere a coveted guest. The traditions of his prayers are cherished in many an Irish family to-day.

He took a nine weeks tour from Dublin through sixty towns into villages, preaching a hundred sermons, six times in the open air, and once in a place which he says was "large but not elegant a cow house." "I was delighted," says Alexander Knox, "to find his cheerfulness in no respect abated. It was too obvious that his bodily frame was sinking; but his spirit was as alert as ever, and he was little less the light of the company he happened to be in than he had been three-and-twenty years before, when I first knew him. Such unclouded sunshine of the breast, in the deepest winter of age and on the felt verge of eternity, bespoke a mind whose recollections were as unsullied as its present sensations were serene."

He presided over his last Irish Conference (1789), and wrote: "I found such a body of men as I hardly believed could have been found together in Ireland; men of so sound experience, so deep piety, and so strong understanding. I am convinced they are no way inferior to the English Conference, except it be in number."

Wesley closed his farewell service in Ireland with his brother's hymn, "Come, let us join our friends above," pronouncing it the sweetest hymn his brother ever wrote. Before going on shipboard the vast crowd on the quay again joined him in singing. He then knelt down and asked God to bless them and their families, the Church, and their country. Not a few fell upon his neck and kissed him. As the ship moved from the shore the Irish people saw the patriarch's hands still uplifted in prayer for the land he loved so well, and "they saw his face no more."

After Conference in 1789 he made a tour of Cornwall. Where once they had mobbed, him they now lined the streets to stare "as if the king were going by." Twenty-five thousand people heard him preach at Gwennap pit.

He wrote on January 1, 1790: "I am now an old man, decayed from head to foot. My eyes are dim; my right hand shakes much; my mouth is hot and dry every morning; I have a lingering fever almost every day; my motion is weak and slow. However, blessed be God, I do not slack my labor; I can preach and write still." He continued to rise at four, and was a prodigy of energy and industry. Once more he visited Scotland, but it was apparent that his work was done. On his last birthday, June 28, 1790, he thinks his strength "probably will not return in this world. But I feel no pain from head to foot; only it seems nature is exhausted, and, humanly speaking, will sink more and more till the weary springs of life stand still." Tyerman truly observes, "No weary child of innocence ever went to its welcome couch with greater serenity than Wesley went down the steps leading to his sepulcher."

This year he revisited Epworth, preaching at the market cross. Companies of people went with him from village to village, men walking on one side of the road and women on the other, singing as they walked, guarding their precious charge. His salutation to the crowds as he passed was in the words of his favorite apostle: "Little children, love one another."

The last Conference he attended was at Bristol, in 1790. In England there were now 71,463 members of society; in America, 43,260; and on the mission fields, 5,350. The results during the last ten years of Wesley's life were more than double the united results of the forty years preceding. "The Conference business over, its venerable head--who for seventy years had directed its deliberations--attached his signature. The autograph--preserved now as a precious relic--too clearly indicates that his eyes were dim, and that his hand had forgot its cunning."

But still he traveled, and preached in Wales, in Bristol and other towns in the west and south, in the Isle of Wight, whose "poor, plain artless society" delights him. Then companies of the brethren come out to meet him as he returns to London.

His last open-air service was held under an ash tree in the churchyard at Winchelsea, Sussex, on October 6, 1790. He preached at noon, that the people who were at work might hear. He stood on a large oak dining table, and spoke from the words, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel." One who was present said, "The word was with mighty power, and the tears of the people flowed in torrents." The ash was long known as "Wesley's tree," and the vicar of the parish has hard work to protect it from relic-hunting pilgrims.

Henry Crabb Robinson, the first war correspondent of the London Times and one of the founders of London University, heard Wesley preach at Colchester, and says that he stood in a wide pulpit and on each side of him was a minister, the two holding him up. His voice was scarcely audible, and his reverend countenance, with the long white locks, formed a picture never to be forgotten. "Of the kind, I never saw anything comparable to it in after life." After the people had sung a verse Wesley rose and said: "It gives me a great pleasure to find that you have not lost your singing, neither men nor women. You have not forgotten a single note. And I hope, by the assistance of God, which enables you to sing well, you may do all other things well." A universal "Amen" followed. A little ejaculation or prayer of three or four words followed each division of the sermon. After the last prayer Wesley, rose up and addressed the people on liberality of sentiment, and spoke much against refusing to join with any congregation on account of difference of opinion."

In these last days his constant prayer was, "Lord, let me not live to be useless;" and James Rogers tells us that he often closed family prayers in the preachers' home, City Road, with the verse: O that without a lingering groan I may the welcome word receive; My body with my charge lay down, And cease at once to work and live!

He writes his last letter to America on February 1, 1791: "Those that desire to write . . . to me have no time to lose, for time has shaken me by the hand, and death is not far behind .... Lose no opportunity of declaring to all men that the Methodists are one people in all the world, and that it is their full determination so to continue, Though mountains rise, and oceans roll, To sever us in vain."

He arranged for another journey to Bath, and thence north, but that journey was never taken. He preached for the last time in City Road Chapel on Tuesday evening, February 22. Next day he preached in a magistrate's house at Leatherhead, eighteen miles from London. The text was, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found; call ye upon him while he is near." This was Wesley's last sermon.

The last of his innumerable letters was addressed to William Wilberforce, the anti-slavery apostle. A better he never penned:

LONDON, FEBRUARY 24, 1791.

MY DEAR SIR: Unless the divine Power has raised you up to be as Athanasius, contra roundurn, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that 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.

Weakness grew upon him daily. He was taken to the house in City Road, but was very feeble. One day he would have written, but could not wield the pen. Miss Ritchie suggested, "Let me write for you, sir; tell me what you would say."

"Nothing," he replied, "but that God is with us." He begged the friends who had gathered round him to "pray and praise," responding with a fervent "Amen" to their petitions. He grasped their hands and said, "Farewell, farewell." As others entered the room he tried to speak, but finding they could not understand him, he summoned all his remaining strength and cried out, "The best of all is, God is with us." Then lifting up his dying arms in token of victory, and raising his feeble voice with a holy triumph not to be expressed, he again repeated the heart-reviving words, "The best of all is, God is with us."

When Mrs. Charles Wesley moistened his lips he repeated the thanksgiving which he had always used after meals, "We thank thee, O Lord, for these and all thy mercies; bless the Church and the king; and grant us truth and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, forever and ever."

During the night he was often heard to say, "I'll praise-- I'll praise." Next morning, about ten o'clock, Joseph Bradford, his faithful companion and nurse, prayed at the bedside, where eleven of Wesley's friends were assembled. The dying patriarch was heard to say, "Farewell;" then as Bradford was repeating, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and this heir of glory shall come in!" he entered, "without a lingering groan," into the joy of his Lord.

His friends standing around sang: Waiting to receive thy spirit, Lo, the Saviour stands above, Shows the purchase of his merit, Reaches out the crown of love. Then they knelt down, and Mr. Rogers led them in prayer "for the descent of the Holy Ghost on us and all who mourn the loss the Church militant sustains by the removal of our much-loved father to his great reward."

John Wesley died on Wednesday, March 2, 1791, in his eighty-eighth year. The day before his funeral his body was laid in City Road Chapel, and ten thousand persons passed through the building to take a last look upon his face. The poet Rogers was one of the number, and was wont to speak of the peace and beauty of the face, on which there lingered a heavenly smile.

To lessen the dangers of a vast crowd it was thought desirable for the funeral to take place in the early morning of Wednesday, March 9. The service was read by the Rev. John Richardson, one of the clergymen who had helped Wesley for nearly thirty years. When he came to the words, "Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother," and substituted with profound feeling the word "father," the throng of people were deeply affected, and loud sobs took the place of silent tears.

In one of his American addresses of 1878 Dean Stanley said: "On visiting in London the City Road Chapel, in which John Wesley ministered, and the cemetery adjoining, in which he is buried, I asked an old man who showed me the cemetery --I asked him, perhaps inadvertently, and as an English Churchman might naturally ask--' By whom was this cemetery Consecrated' And he answered, ' It was consecrated by the bones of that holy man, that holy servant of God, John Wesley.'"

At the first Conference after Wesley's death Joseph Bradford produced a sealed letter, which Wesley had charged him to deliver to the president, containing his last counsels to the Conference. It was dated 1785 and stated that some of the traveling preachers had expressed a fear lest those who were named in the Deed of Declaration should exclude their brethren "either from preaching in connection with you or from some other privileges which they now enjoy. I know no other way to prevent any such inconvenience than to leave these, my last words, with you. I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that you never avail yourselves of the Deed of Declaration to assume any superiority over your brethren, but let all things go on among those itinerants who choose to remain together exactly in the same manner as when I was with you, so far as circumstances will permit. In particular, I beseech you, if you ever loved me, and if you now love God and your brethren, to have no respect for persons in stationing the preachers, in choosing children for the Kingswood School, in disposing of the yearly contribution and the preachers' fund, or any other public money. But do all things with a single eye, as I have done from the beginning. Go on thus, doing all things without prejudice or Partiality, and God will be with you even to the end."