

# LIGHT YOURSELF ON FIRE



“Light yourself on fire with passion, and people will come from miles to watch you burn.”

~ John Wesley ~

**For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.**

**1 Thessalonians 1:4-5**

"Decay in religion, licentiousness in morals, public corruption and profaneness of language." You could be mistaken in thinking that these words describe our modern society. They were, in fact, written in the eighteenth century by an essayist called Mark Pattison. These words are his summary of what English society was like in his day.

Gin was cheap in the first half of that century, and public houses were crowded places. Advertisements hanging in the lanes of London read, "Drunk for a penny. Dead drunk for twopence. Free straw to lie on." As well as drunkenness in the streets, gambling and fighting were also rife. Death even became a means of popular entertainment. A day of amusement might have involved taking the family out for a picnic to

watch the public hangings in Tyburn. The hangings attracted crowds of thousands and were more like fairs than serious legal ceremonies. Hogarth's paintings vividly depict the depraved state of England at that time.

The moral state of a society is often a reflection of the spiritual condition of the church within that society. True believers are called to be like salt within the world, helping to stem the rise of sin and immorality. Jesus warned that salt becomes useless once it loses its saltiness (Matt 5:13). The established church of the early eighteenth century was deeply influenced by rationalistic thought and liked to use "the language of fashionable society." Cold intellectualism and human reason crept in while passionate faith in God vanished out the door. Worship became formal, respectable and very much a religion of the middle and upper classes. One prominent bishop at that time, when offered the position of Archbishop of Canterbury, declined with the response, "It's too late for me to save a dying church. It will have disappeared in my lifetime."

Such was the state of the established church in that period. Human reason was held in higher esteem than the wisdom of God. As a result, the church became apathetic, powerless and dead. It well and truly lost its saltiness.

But something happened that profoundly transformed English society in that century. God raised up several individual men who lifted their voices and boldly proclaimed the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen. As these men preached, the Holy Spirit moved powerfully over the crowds who flocked to hear them. Soon, the whole nation was in an uproar!

One of these men was John Wesley.

Born into a Christian home in 1709, Wesley grew up believing that eternal salvation depended on the good things he could do to prepare himself for heaven. This belief radically changed in 1738 when his heart was "strangely warmed" after experiencing the New Birth. He finally realised it was impossible to earn his way to heaven through his own good works. He then became convinced that salvation came only as a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This experience turned his life upside down!

Wesley began to proclaim the key message, "By grace, ye are saved through faith," in all his sermons. He expounded the need for all people to come to life-saving faith through Jesus Christ so that they could be saved from sin and the consequences of sin. Wesley declared, "Nothing but this can give a check to the immorality which hath overspread the land as a flood."

He spoke about Christ at every opportunity, but churches everywhere began to shut their doors to him. The respectable church establishment generally opposed the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. Wesley then began to preach outdoors, and as he did, enormous crowds followed wherever he went. He preached in open fields and meadows, city streets and highways. The Holy Spirit moved among the multitudes who were "indeed ripe for the Gospel," and thousands experienced the New Birth. Many outcasts of the day — such as harlots, thieves, prisoners and drunkards — received the message with gladness. Wesley also preached to the coal miners, who were considered "lawless, brutal, and worse than heathen." Their hearts were so moved that their tears made "white gutters down their black cheeks."

The transformation of individual lives led to the transformation of whole towns, villages and workplaces. Wesley described what happened in the factories of one town:

*"The whole scene was changed. In three of the factories, no more lewdness or profaneness was found; for God had put a new song in their mouth, and blasphemies were turned to praise...No trifling word was heard among them, and they watch over each other in love."*

He described the transformation that had occurred in another town:

*"In this town there is a change indeed! It was wicked to a proverb: remarkable for Sabbath-breaking, cursing, swearing, drunkenness, and a general contempt of religion. But it is not so now. Open wickedness disappears; no oaths are heard, no drunkenness seen in the streets. And many have not only ceased from evil and learned to do well, but are witnesses of the inward kingdom of God, 'righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.'"*

These powerful works of God continued to follow and bless Wesley's ministry throughout his lifetime. Some historians have said that his preaching saved England from social unrest and a revolution similar to that of France. As revival erupted across the land, God's power "laid hold of the lower classes and converted them before they were ripe for explosion." This revival directly influenced social reformers such as William Wilberforce, John Howard, and many others.

As we gaze around the world today, we see tremendous "decay in religion, licentiousness in morals, public corruption and profaneness of language." The tsunami of immorality and the chaos erupting in every corner of the globe is overwhelming. The situation seems as dark, if not darker, than in Wesley's era.

If the moral state of a society is a reflection of the spiritual condition of the church, then we, the Church, need to humbly come before God, pray, seek his face and repent of our wicked ways (2 Chron 7:14). How did we lose our saltiness? Before we point the finger at those outside church walls, we first must examine ourselves.

*Do we truly know God?*

*Is Jesus Christ exalted and at the centre of all we say and do?*

*Are we placing human reason above God's truth and wisdom?*

*Are we trusting in human methods rather than God's ways?*

*Are we making names for ourselves rather than glorifying God's name?*

*Are we listening to the world's voice above God's voice?*

*Are our good ideas self-initiated or God-initiated?*

*Are we seeking human happiness above God's will?*

*Are we trying to please people rather than God?*

*Are we seeking God for himself or only for what we want him to do for us?*



John Wesley was an ordinary human being, like you or me. He was weak, flawed and fearful and had no power of his own. But God used him. God is in the business of using weak and foolish vessels. That means he can use us too.

If he is to form us into beautiful vessels fit for Kingdom purposes, then we must ensure our hearts are clean and supple. Are we mouldable clay in the potter's hand? The Lord could only use the clay pot called John Wesley after John had humbly bowed his knee in repentance, placed his trust in Jesus Christ and learned to obey his Master's voice. Only then did the Holy Spirit flow through him to transform countless lives.

I know what a weak, flawed and fearful vessel I am, but the Lord Almighty keeps reminding me: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit (Zech 4:6)." Jesus is strong, and his power can transform my life. He can also transform yours. We may not be used in the same manner as Wesley, but the Holy Spirit's power through us will enable us to be like salt within our own families, schools, workplaces and communities.

Perhaps it is time for any of us who are willing to enter our prayer closets, bow our knees, seek the Lord and dare to ask him: "Search me, God, and know my heart. Show me if there is anything that displeases you." It's a daunting prayer. It takes courage to utter such words. But it is a necessary prayer if we are to be used by him in this decaying world. It is God's kindness that will lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Transformation has to begin in each of us.

**Dear Father,**

**Search me, God, and know my heart. Show me if there is anything that displeases you. Lead me to repentance. I want to follow after your ways and be used by you to glorify your name.**

**I ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.**