

JOHN WESLEY AND JOHN NELSON.

JOHN NELSON was a Yorkshire mason, of good conduct, and blessed with a good wife and a good business. But he was a man unhappy in mind. His sinfulness was a constant burden; the fear of judgment a constant terror to him.

"Surely," said he, "God never made man to be such a riddle to himself, and to leave him so! There must be something in religion that I am unacquainted with, to satisfy the empty mind of man, or he is in a worse state than the beasts who perish." Thus he went on till he heard Wesley preach one morning in Moorfields.

"Oh, that was a blessed morning for my soul! As soon as he got upon the stand he stroked back his hair, and turned his face towards where I stood, and I thought he fixed his eyes on me. His countenance struck such an awful dread upon me before I heard him speak, that it made my heart beat like the pendulum of a clock; and when he did speak, I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me."

At this point we may quote one of those powerful personal appeals by which Wesley would pierce the conscience of listeners such as Nelson. "Who," said the preacher, "who art thou that now seest and feelest both thine inward and outward ungodliness? Thou art the man. I want thee for my Lord. I challenge thee for a child of God by faith. The Lord hath need of thee. Thou who feelest thou art just fit for hell, art just fit to advance His glory—the glory of His free grace, justifying the ungodly and him that worketh not. Oh, come quickly! Believe in the Lord Jesus, and thou art reconciled to God."

Again, "Thou ungodly one, who hearest or readest these words, thou vile, helpless, miserable sinner, I charge thee before God, the Judge of all, go direct unto Him with all thy ungodliness. Take heed thou destroy not thy own soul by pleading thy own righteousness more or less. Go as altogether ungodly, guilty, lost, destroyed, deserving and dropping into hell; and thou shalt then find favour in His sight, and know that He justifieth the ungodly. As such thou shalt be brought unto the blood of sprinkling, as an undone, helpless, condemned sinner. Then look unto Jesus! Here is the Lamb of God who taketh away thy sins. Plead thou no works, no righteousness of thine own, no humility, no contritious sincerity in no wise. That were in very deed to deny the Lord that bought thee. No. Plead thou singly the blood of the covenant, the ransom paid for thy proud, stubborn, sinful soul."

By this language, or language such as this, Nelson was won over from uncertainty and unhappiness to find rest for his soul. Speaking earnestly to his neighbours at his home at Bristol, he gradually gathered around him a large congregation. He wrote to Wesley as to his spiritual father to instruct him "how to proceed in the work which God had begun by such an unpolished tool as himself." Wesley came and saw him, and in reference to him and others like him who preached, he said, "I durst not refuse their assistance." Nelson afterwards accompanied Wesley in some of his itinerating expeditions.

Wesley proceeded to the north of England, making his first visit to Nelson on the way. The evening had set in when he entered on foot the great town of Newcastle. The sight, might recall his recollections of the collieries of Kingswood. Oaths and drunkenness abounded on every side. "Surely this place is ripe for Him who came to call sinners to repentance."

At seven o'clock on Sunday morning he went to the poorest part of the town, and having sung the hundredth psalm, he preached. The poor people stared at him with the utmost astonishment. "If you desire to know who I am," he said, "my name is John Wesley; and I live in the evening, with God's help, I design to preach here again." The station on which he intended to preach was the top of a hill; at the hour named the hill was covered from top to bottom.

"I never saw so large a number of people together," he writes. "I know it was not possible for one half to hear, although my voice was then strong and clear, and I stood so as to have them all in view as they were ranged on the side of the hill. The word of God which I set before them was, 'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely.' After preaching, the poor people were ready to tread me under foot, out of pure love and kindness."

On his way back he visited Epworth. So many years had passed, that he found himself a stranger in the old place. He stayed at an inn, however, which he found was kept by a former servant of his father. As the people were coming out, notice was given that Mr. Wesley, not being permitted to preach in the church, would preach in the churchyard.

"Accordingly at six I came, and found such a congregation as, I believe, Epworth never saw before. I stood near the east end of the church, upon my father's tombstone, and cried, 'The kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.'" There are few recollections so affecting and memorable as Wesley thus preaching upon his father's grave. By it the good old man, though dead, yet spake with the voice of his living son.

Evening after evening, for a week together, he preached on that tombstone, and never were his ministrations so successful. Among his hearers, one evening, was a gentleman who made it his boast that he had not entered a church for thirty years. On this occasion, however, he had entered a churchyard. When the sermon was ended, he stood fixed as a statue. Wesley saw him, and asked abruptly, "Sir, are you a sinner?" "Sinner enough," was the reply, in a deep and broken voice, and the man continued staring upwards, till his wife and servants, all in tears, put him into his chaise and took him home.

Ten years later, Wesley writes in his Journal, "I called on the gentleman who told me he was 'sinner enough' when I preached first at Epworth on my father's tomb, and was agreeably surprised to find him strong in faith, though exceeding weak in body. For some years, he told me, he had been rejoicing in God, without either doubt or fear, and was now waiting for the welcome hour when he should depart and be with Christ."