John Wesley (1703-1791) is one of the most prominent figures in church history. Wesley's contemporaries recognized this, and no church history book covering the period from the Reformation to the present can omit discussing Wesley without bringing its credibility into question. Some claim that he is the outstanding figure of Christianity in the 1700s. A voluminous, intimidating amount of literature exists about Wesley, but what follows is a simple, brief overview of his life and theology.

John Wesley’s Early Life (1703-1738).

Wesley was the fifteenth of nineteen children and the second surviving son of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Both of his grandfathers were Puritan Nonconformists, but his father was an Anglican minister, the rector of Epworth. Wesley had two brothers and seven sisters, and nine of his other siblings died in infancy. His older brother, Samuel, left home when Wesley was just one year old. Wesley’s other brother, Charles, was four years younger and Wesley’s closest sibling throughout his life.

Rescue from a House Fire: His father’s parsonage burned down when Wesley was just five years old, and Wesley providentially did not perish. For the rest of his life, he cherished this narrow escape from death and viewed himself as “a brand plucked from the burning.”

Who Was John Wesley?

Part 1: John Wesley’s Life

Andrew Naselli

In his book Reaching God’s Ear, Sam Storms has an excellent chapter entitled “Persisting in Prayers Without ‘Pestering God.’” After dealing extensively with this passage, Storms gives six reasons why we should persist in prayer:

• We should persist in prayer because God, unlike the judge, is good and gracious.

• We should persist in prayer because such prayer will compel us to depend wholly upon God.

• We should persist in prayer because when we pray persistently about some specific matter, we are enabled to differentiate between impetuous, ill-conceived desires and sincere, deep-seated ones.

• We should persist in prayer because persistence serves to purify the content of our petitions.

• We should persist in prayer because being forced to pray persistently enables us, by God’s grace, to overcome impatience.

We are needy and God is gracious. Therefore, let’s learn to pray and pray.

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in London. Wesley's journal explains this experience:

In the evening I went very 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.

Eighteen days later he preached on Ephesians 2:8 in the pulpit of St. Mary's in Oxford, and for the next half-century, he energetically preached the gospel to anyone who would listen. When the parishes in the cold, liturgical Church of England, of which he was an ordained priest, did not embrace his direct evangelistic preaching, he boldly declared, "The whole world is my parish."

John Wesley's Ministry (1738-1791)

Preaching: In 1739, Whitefield encouraged Wesley to preach in the open air in order to reach more people with the gospel. Wesley could not speak as masterfully as Whitefield, and some described him as a talking marble statue with the exception of his hand that turned his sermon pages. Wesley experienced revival in the midst of the First Great Awakening, and many have speculated that without this moral transformation, England would have had its own version of the French Revolution. Throughout his ministry, he was an itinerant preacher, known to many as "the man on horseback" rather than as an Oxford scholar. He traveled approximately 250,000 miles, mostly on horseback.

Organizing Methodists: Wesley founded the Methodist movement, initially called the United Societies of the People Called Methodists. Converts swelled in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and later America, and Wesley led a well-organized network of preachers to promote doctrinal uniformity and disciplined, practical holiness. The movement, however, was relatively small in the 1700s. His strict "General Rules" encouraged doing good, avoiding all evil, and benefitting from the means of grace. Wesley tirelessly organized Methodists into societies, preachers, class leaders, band leaders, stewards, trustees, and visitors of the sick. Wesley never left the Church of England and never intended for Methodists to break with it but to renew it.

Methodists, however, gained their own identity, and Anglicans broke with them after Wesley's death.

Writing: He published over four hundred books and pamphlets prepared especially for the devotional use of Methodists. His fifty-volume Christian Library contains extracts of what he viewed as the most significant Christian works. His collected works take up thirty-two volumes, and his published sermons or treatises comprise eight volumes. He also wrote many hymns though he did so in the shadow of the grand hymnody of his brother Charles. His Journal is filled with anecdotes that highlight the Methodist movement, and his bibliography reflects his wide range of interests including theology, poetry, science, philosophy, travel, novels, classics, and bestsellers.

The whole world is my parish.
- John Wesley

John Wesley's Relationship with George Whitefield

Whitefield (1714-1770) was eleven years younger than Wesley and in the year of his conversion called him "my spiritual father in Christ." Whitefield was part of Wesley's Holy Club at Oxford, and at the end of his life he requested that Wesley preach his funeral sermon. Some Calvinists questioned whether Wesley was even converted, and one person "asked Whitefield if he expected to see Wesley in heaven, to which he replied: 'I fear not, for he will be so near the eternal throne and we at such a distance we shall hardly get a sight of him!'"

Their Disagreement and Division: Whitefield, however, was a Calvinist, and Wesley was militantly against Calvinism. This led to a public divide between them. The division began in 1739 when Wesley, in spite of Whitefield's pleading not to do so, published his sermon "Free Grace," which attacked Calvinism's view of predestination. When Wesley published it in England, Whitefield was traveling to America, and their correspondence about the issue made the division even sharper. When Whitefield returned to England in March 1741, he published a rebuttal to Wesley's controversial sermon.

Why are we commanded to pray continually? Why is it that we are commanded to pray without ceasing? Why is it that we are commanded to continually pray? We should continually pray because we are continually needy and God is continually merciful.

Why Should We Persevere in Prayer?

Luke 18.1-8

Scott Wilquettte

Both Jesus and the New Testament writers continually challenge us to persist and persevere in prayer. The reason is obvious. For many of us prayer is difficult, and when we don't see God answer our prayers as we want or when we want, we become discouraged. Therefore we are commanded over and over to persist and persevere in prayer. 1 Thessalonians 5.17 reads, "Pray without ceasing." Ephesians 6.18 reads, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." Colossians 4.2 commands, "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."

God's people should continually pray. Consistent prayer is a hallmark of the Christian faith. The question is "Why are we to pray continually?" Are we to pray consistently because the quality of our prayer is dependant on the quantity of our words? Are we to pray consistently because we think God is ignorant of our needs? Are we to pray consistently because God is somewhat forgetful and needs continual reminders? Are we to pray consistently because it is our job to convince or sway God? Do we pray in order to change God's mind?

We should continually pray because we are continually needy, and God is continually merciful.

Why is it that we are commanded to pray without ceasing? Why is it that we are commanded to continually pray? We should continually pray because we are continually needy and God is continually merciful.

The Background Of The Parable Of The Unjust Judge (Luke 18.1-8)

In this parable the two main characters, the unjust judge and the widow, parallel God and God's children (18.6-7). Notice the areas where there is no parallel. (Incidentally, the way you locate parallels in a parable is by noting the words of the biblical text. When you study parables don't draw parallels unless the Bible draws them.) This judge was driven by arrogant selfishness. He cared about no one but himself (18.2,4). God, on the other hand, loves those who hate Him, and He demonstrates that love continually by showing kindness to every human being and by granting salvation to His elect.

This judge was unjust. It's apparent from the parable that the widow's plea is a just plea. She has legitimately been wronged, and this judge doesn't care. God, however, is absolutely just and righteous in all His dealings. He is the very definition of righteousness.

This judge is influenced by inconvenience. The only reason he granted justice to this woman was because it served his best interests and kept her out of his hair. God, however, is not influenced by the sheer volume of someone's prayers. In Matthew 6.7-8 Jesus states, "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." What exactly is Jesus condemning when He condemns "vain repetitions?" He is not condemning lamentation. Luke 6.12 mentions that Jesus prayed all night. He is also not condemning repetition during prayer. Matthew 26.36-45 records that in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed three times that the cup of death would pass from Him. What Jesus is condemning here is the kind of prayer that involves repetition for the sake of influence. It was common in Jesus' day to Gentiles to pray the same prayers over and over, thinking that repetition was the key to answered prayer. Jesus' point is that babbling is not how we pray to the Father. Unlike the unjust judge, constant, nagging prayer has no influence over God. Luke 18.1-8 is not teaching that if a person nags God enough, God will give in and give him what he wants. Not only does Luke 18.1-8 not teach that, but also Jesus absolutely condemns that kind of attitude in Matthew 6.5-8. Commenting on prayer in his Institutes, John Calvin wrote, Christ does not give in and give him what he wants. Not only does Luke 18.1-8 not teach that, but also Jesus absolutely condemns that kind of attitude in Matthew 6.5-8. Commenting on prayer in his Institutes, John Calvin wrote, Christ does not "forbid us to persist in prayers, long, often or with much feeling, but requires that we should not be confident in our ability to wrest something from God by beating upon His ears with a garrulous [verbose] flow of talk, as if He could be persuaded as men are." This judge was wearied by this woman's petitions for justice. God, on the other hand, never tires of our genuine pleas for help. James 1.5 states, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

This woman meant nothing to this judge. He cared about no one but himself. Notice, however, that God

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