

REFLECTIONS ON GEORGE WHITEFIELD

(Adapted from the book *"If You Can Keep It"* By Eric Metaxas)

George Whitefield, the famous preacher, was born in England Dec. 16, 1714. His parents were poor and he was the youngest of seven children. As his father died when he was only two, he was forced to work as a servant at an early age at his family's inn. One day a visitor changed his future with a startling idea. George could go to Oxford as a "servitor" and gain an education by doing the same humble servant work he did at home. George was eager for the opportunity.

By the time George entered Oxford, however, he had made a major commitment to a life of piety. His views were extreme. He refused to be lured into worldly temptations by his peers, but chose instead to join a "Holy Club". That tiny group of only about 15, included both Charles and John Wesley. Whitefield's desire for self denial almost killed him. He felt it was wrong to eat fruit or any food that tasted good. He survived on coarse bread and sage tea without sugar. He refused to sew his garments or clean his shoes. He refused to tell a joke or even laugh. He felt called to pray in the rain while lying upon the ground. His health deteriorated! His discovered of the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith, however, utterly transformed his life and his ministry. Over the next 33 years he is said to have preached 18,000 sermons with 12,000 other "talks and exhortations".

Illustrative of his effectiveness is something that happened on Tuesday, Feb. 17, 1739. With no promotion or advertising, he climbed to the top of a mound at Rose Green in Kingston. About 200 people walking home from work stopped to hear him preach. The next day he did the same and thousands showed up. The third time nearly 20,000 were in the audience. Most of them were poverty stricken coal miners, much in need of Christ but deliberately ignored by the state church.

On his second trip to America in Nov. 1739, this 24 year old evangelist stepped off a ship in the bustling harbor of Philadelphia. When he spoke from the court house steps, 33 year old Benjamin Franklin was in the audience. As an amateur scientist he conducted an experiment which he later included in his autobiography. Curious to know how far Whitefield's voice could be heard, he pressed through the crowds from the middle of Market Street past Second Street, and finally to Front Street by the river. Only then could he not hear clearly. Allowing 2 square feet for every listener, Franklin computed that he could well be heard clearly by over 30,000 people. During a brief 6 week period Whitefield preached over 175 sermons to tens of thousands.

To illustrate the hunger for the Gospel on the American frontier, Metaxas relates the firsthand account of a farmer and carpenter named Nathan Cole from Middletown Connecticut. Here is a brief summary condensed from pages 105 - 108. On Oct. 23, 1740 Cole was working in the field when he heard that Whitefield would be preaching at 10:00 a.m., 12 miles away in Middletown. He immediately dropped his tool and ran to the house tell his wife. After saddling the horse they rode as fast as possible. When the horse got winded, Cole would dismount and run along side. When they came within a half mile of the road from Hartford they saw a cloud of dust and heard the thunder of horses hoofs. Others were in a hurry too! He found a vacancy between two horses and they slipped in between oblivious to the dust. They still had 3 more miles to go and no man spoke a word in their haste to hear the sermon. Upon arrival at the meeting house they found that 3 or 4 thousand were already there and boats in the river were bringing more. When Whitefield mounted the scaffold Cole described him as bold and undaunted. Cole was trembling with fear before the message even began as he was convinced that the speaker was clothed with authority from God.

Paul told Timothy: **"Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season . . ."** (2 **Tim 4:2**) Based on the experiences of George Whitefield, his preaching was obviously "in season".