

CHAPTER 12

The Great Awakening

A Nation Spiritually Asleep

The Great Awakening, during the 1700's, had an amazing impact upon the world.

The Pilgrims settled in this country during the first part of the 17th century. During the first part of the 18th century the churches in America (for the most part) were chilled into a deep sleep. The new generation had lost the spiritual zeal of their parents. The older generation had come to this country seeking God. They wanted to have the freedom to worship God as they knew they should. As the years passed, the newer generations began to lose what their parents had fought so hard to gain. As prosperity, commerce and wealth increased, they began to forget God from whom all blessings flow! They became wrapped up in materialism and were more concerned about the things of this world than they were about the things of God.

How is your spiritual zeal as compared with your parents' zeal? Are you concerned about the things of God as much as your parents are? Do you love the Bible, God's holy Word, as much as your parents do? Do you attend church for the same reasons your parents do? How is your spiritual temperature compared with the spiritual temperature of your parents? Assuming that your parents are saved and love the Lord, are you on fire for the Lord as much as they are? If your spiritual zeal is much less than theirs, what do you think will be true of your children? Your grandchildren?

The spiritual condition of America in the early part of the 17th century has been described by different men who actually lived during the time. For example, in 1706 Dr. Cotton Mather said, "there is a general and horrible decay of Christianity among those who profess it." Is there a difference between professing Christ and possessing Christ? For each of the following verses, write either PROFESSING or POSSESSING:

_____ Titus 1:16
 _____ 1 John 5:12 (the first half of the verse)
 _____ John 1:12
 _____ 1 John 2:4,9

In 1721 Dr. Increase Mather said, "Oh, degenerate New England, what art thou come to at this day? How art those sins become common in thee that once were not so much as heard of in this land?" The sins which were once unheard of had become quite common!

In 1730 Jonathan Edwards (whom we shall learn more about later in this chapter) complained of the drunkenness and **licentious living** (very loose living, especially sexually) among the youth of the town and the lack of parental control and godly example. The young people were worldly and wild, the parents had no control over them and the parents were very poor examples themselves!

At about the same time a Boston preacher gave this sad report: "Alas, as though nothing but the

most amazing thunders and lightning, and the most terrible earthquakes could awaken us, we are at this time fallen into as dead a sleep as ever." There was a tremendous need for a spiritual awakening to arouse the people of the land.

Later in 1740 the Rev. Samuel Blair commented on conditions in Pennsylvania: "The nature and necessity of the new birth were little known." People did not understand what the new birth was all about (see John 3:1-8) and they failed to realize how necessary it was (see John 3:7 "must").

What about your friends and neighbors and relatives? Do they really understand what it means to be born again? Do they realize how important it is to be born again? Do you?

Early Leaders of the Great Awakening

God used different men to begin waking up the sleepers. Theodore Frelinghuysen, a pastor in New Jersey, was a great influence in the early stages of the Awakening. He was a powerful preacher who strongly emphasized the need for **conversion**. The word "conversion" means "to turn, to change your direction." Men need to know that they are going the wrong way (the way of sin and death and destruction) and they need to turn and go God's way! Those who do not **turn to God and change their direction** will never

_____ (Matthew 18:3). All great preachers of this church age, beginning with the Apostle Peter, have stressed the need for genuine conversion. In Acts 3:19 Peter told his Jewish listeners: "**REPENT** (change your mind) ye, therefore, and B _____ C _____ (change your direction), that your _____ may be _____."

Another early leader of the Awakening was William Tennent, the pastor of a church in Pennsylvania. In the corner of his yard he built a log cabin to be used as a school house. In this school he trained his sons and 15 other men for the ministry. These trained men, and especially his older son Gilbert (who was influenced also by Frelinghuysen), started a revival which ran like a forest fire from Long Island to Virginia. God used these "log cabin" graduates in a very special way!

Jonathan Edwards



Jonathan Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut in 1703. He had quite an unusual childhood. At the age of 6 he began to study Latin. When he was 13 years old he was fluent in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He graduated from Yale at the head of his class when he was only 17. The Lord blessed him with a brilliant mind.

In 1727 he became the pastor of a Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts. When he came the church was in a state of spiritual deadness (the people were in a deep spiritual sleep!). In December 1734 Edwards preached a series of sermons on Justification (incidentally, he had the habit of studying 13 hours a day!). Edwards was not the most exciting speaker. He delivered his sermons in a monotone, and his eyes rarely strayed from the back wall of the church. But Edwards spoke the truth and the Spirit of God took the Word of God and pierced many hearts. With great vividness the tall, slender, serious young minister pictured the wrath of God, from which he urged sinners to flee. The awakening which resulted from this preaching of God's Word is here described in Edwards' own words:

There was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. Those who were wont (accustomed) to be the vainest and loosest; and those who had been most disposed to think, and speak slightly of vital and experimental religion, were now generally subject to great awakenings. And the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did, as it were, come by flocks to Jesus Christ. From day to day, for many months together, might be seen evident instances of sinners brought out of darkness into marvelous light, and delivered out of a horrible pit, and from the miry clay, and set upon a rock with a new song of praise to God in their mouths (see 1 Peter 2:9 and Psalm 40:1-3).

This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town; so that in the spring and summer following, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought unto them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands (from *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* by Jonathan Edwards).

This awakening made a huge difference in the worship services as Edwards describes:

The goings of God were then seen in His sanctuary, God's day was a delight and His tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive in God's service, everyone earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink the words of the minister as they came from his mouth. The assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the Word was preached, some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for their neighbors (from *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* by Jonathan Edwards).

During the first year of the revival more than 300 persons professed conversion (how many were truly converted and eternally saved, God Himself knows).

Jonathan Edwards' most famous sermon was preached at Enfield, Connecticut in July 1741. It was entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In this message, Edwards described the terrible doom of the ungodly and he warned the people of the terrible danger which every unsaved person is presently in (compare John 3:36, the last part of the verse). Before the sermon was ended there was an urgent sense of conviction which spread over the people as they became painfully aware of their sin and their danger. There was such a breathing of distress and weeping that the preacher was obliged to speak to the people and desire silence that he might be heard (Note: This message can still be found in print in libraries, etc., and you may find it interesting to read).

George Whitefield



The second great name that is connected with the Great Awakening is George Whitefield. Whitefield was born in England in 1714. At Oxford University he attended the "Holy Club" where he came to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. John Wesley (the great preacher) and Charles Wesley (the great hymn-writer) were also members of this club. The Wesley brothers were the leaders of the Methodist Movement (which could be described as the Great Awakening in England). Whitefield and the Wesleys worked together preaching the gospel in England.

In 1739 Whitefield preached in the open fields to miners and he invited the Wesleys to do the same. Whitefield had a great love for these miners and wanted them to be saved:

His first congregation was made up of coal miners on the outskirts of Bristol... Whitefield felt a deep burden for them, and as they had no church—indeed, had never heard a preacher—he resolved to bring them the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the open air. Accordingly, he found some high ground, near the exit of the mines, and as they began to appear, he began to preach. Before long, several hundred miners were standing before him, listening to his words about a Saviour who came, not for the righteous but for sinners. He told them of Jesus' love for them. [Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, page 245]

This kind of "open-air preaching" was something quite new for that day. Most people thought that a preacher could only preach in a church. Did the Lord Jesus ever preach in the open air? Whitefield and John Wesley believed that they had a responsibility to preach wherever there were needy men and women, boys and girls.

Although Whitefield had a powerful ministry in England and elsewhere, his greatest work was probably carried out in America. From 1738 to 1770 he made seven preaching tours to America. He would journey up and down through the colonies, spreading the fires of revival wherever he went. He was always ready to preach anywhere. Usually huge crowds came to hear him. He preached to nearly six thousand people on the Boston Commons, with the result that the whole city seemed to awaken to spiritual realities. Sometimes he spoke to as many as 20,000 people. He must have had quite a powerful voice in the days when there were no loud speaker systems!

George Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin were friends. Franklin was very impressed by Whitefield's preaching. Whitefield was very concerned for Franklin's unsaved soul. One day in Philadelphia Franklin was in attendance when Whitefield was preaching in the open air. Franklin was amazed that Whitefield's powerful voice could be heard far and wide. Having a scientific mind, did a little experiment. Franklin walked backwards some distance until he could hear the sermon no more. He then did some calculations and concluded that Whitefield's voice could be heard by thirty thousand people in the open air (without a microphone)! As interesting as this is, it would have been better if Whitefield could have paid close attention to the message of salvation which Whitefield preached. Whitefield wanted Franklin to know the "power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16), not the power of his voice.

Edwards' wife Sarah wrote to her brother in New Haven about her husband's preaching:

It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible...Our mechanics shut up their shops, and the day laborers throw down their tools to go and hear him preach, and few return unaffected. [Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, page 245]

One day George Whitefield preached in Middletown, Connecticut:

Even when he (Whitefield) came unexpectedly to a town, there was an astonishing turnout. For example, there was the time he felt God wanted him to change his itinerary at the last minute and preach at Middletown, Connecticut. The moment they knew he was coming, riders galloped down all the roads ahead of him, spreading the word that the man who had preached in Philadelphia "like one of the old apostles" would soon be preaching in front of the meetinghouse. Farmers dropped their hoes and left their plows, grabbed their wives and mounted their horses. One observer described a sound like distant thunder, and he saw a great cloud rising along the road—everyone was riding as fast as he could down the dirt road to Middletown. When Whitefield arrived, several thousand horses had been tethered in long lines at the back of a vast crowd of dust-covered farmers. It looked as if an entire cavalry division had dismounted and was awaiting him! [Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, page 248-249]

Historians have recognized George Whitefield as one of the greatest preachers of all times. Between 1736 and 1770 he preached more than 18,000 sermons. He died in Massachusetts in 1770 at age 56.

The Sad Aftermath

As the years passed, the fires of revival began to burn out. People began going back to sleep again! As early as the years 1744 to 1748 Jonathan Edwards' church in Northampton, according to his own statement, was utterly dead. In those years not a single conversion took place.

John Wesley, the man God used to bring great awakening to England, realized that revival cannot continue for long. He made the following thoughtful statement:

I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things,

for any renewal of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger and the love of the world in all its branches.

Another problem was the fact that the Great Awakening in America was primarily the result of the zealous labors of certain godly men whom the Lord raised up and used in a mighty way. Men like Whitefield would travel from place to place. While they were present in a town they would have a great and godly influence, but when they left, who would carry on the work which they began? These men of God were here today and gone tomorrow! One historian has written the following concerning Whitefield's ministry:

When he (Whitefield) saw hundreds or thousands at a time melted by his eloquence, he called it a "gracious melting," thanked God for the display of His power, hoped they would prove true converts, and hurried away to preach the gospel to other thousands. Multitudes of cases answered to his hopes. Other multitudes were only made to weep by his eloquence, without being converted, convicted, or even alarmed (*The Great Awakening*, by Joseph Tracy, p. 389).

When the godly preacher leaves town to go elsewhere, the local pastor must continue the work. Whitefield was greatly concerned about the spiritual condition of the pastors, and he tried to arouse the ministers everywhere he went. He once said, "The reason why congregations have been so dead is because dead men preach to them."

One of the biggest problems was the fact that the preachers of the Great Awakening stressed soul winning but not soul building! People need to be saved, but saved people need to grow and be nurtured and strengthened in the faith. The great emphasis of Edwards and Whitefield was on conversion. Someone once asked Whitefield, "Why do you always say, 'You must be born again!'" Whitefield answered, "Because **you must be born again!**" (John 3:7). This is all very true and very important, but it is also true that born again babies need to G_____ (1 Peter 2:2). As you read Acts chapter 20, can you find any verses that show that the Apostle Paul's great concern was that believers be built up and fed and taught the Word of God?

_____ According to the Lord Jesus Christ, what should disciples be taught (Matthew 28:19-20)?

The Time Has Come To Wake Up!

When it comes to your true spiritual condition, are you awake or asleep? When it comes to your spiritual temperature, are you hot, cold or lukewarm (Revelation 3:15-16)? According to 1 Corinthians 15:34, God wants believers to _____ to righteousness and _____ not! In Romans 13:11, we see that the time has come for us to _____ out of _____. In Ephesians 5:14, what message does God have for those who are sleeping? _____ According to 1 Thessalonians 5:6, what are we not to do? _____ Why not (1 Thessalonians 5:5)?

Whether sinner or saint, the time has come to wake up to the reality of God! God is very real and His Word is very true! Those who continue sleeping may awake too late! Have you experienced a great awakening in your life? May you hear and respond to God's alarm clock even this day!