

Christianity 101: The Basics of Our Faith
#1: John Wesley's Journey of Faith
Romans 3:21-26 (Living Bible)
By John Gill

21-22 But now God has shown us a different way to heaven—not by “being good enough” and trying to keep his laws, but by a new way (though not new, really, for the Scriptures told about it long ago). Now God says he will accept and acquit us—declare us “not guilty”—if we trust Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, by coming to Christ, no matter who we are or what we have been like. 23 Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious ideal; 24 yet now God declares us “not guilty” of offending him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in his kindness freely takes away our sins.

25 For God sent Christ Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to end all God’s anger against us. He used Christ’s blood and our faith as the means of saving us from his wrath. In this way he was being entirely fair, even though he did not punish those who sinned in former times. For he was looking forward to the time when Christ would come and take away those sins. 26 And now in these days also he can receive sinners in this same way because Jesus took away their sins.

When I was in college everybody HATED to take the “101” classes – you know – those basic freshmen classes that the college required all students to take. One reason they didn’t like them was because they considered them to be “Mickey Mouse” courses – classes that mostly reviewed material they had already covered in high school (and THOUGHT they already knew!). But college freshmen despised those courses even more because the teachers seemed to take joy in making those classes extra-hard in order to remind the students that they weren’t quite as smart as they thought they were! (No one likes to be reminded of that!)

But you know, looking back on the experience most students had to admit that they really DID need those refresher courses after all – that they weren’t as smart as they thought they were and they benefited a great deal for having taken those “101” classes.

You know, as Christians none of US are as smart as WE may think WE are, either! That is why I have decided to devote the better part of this summer to an overview of the Christian faith in our Wesleyan tradition – a series I’m calling “Christianity 101: The Basics of our Faith.” The “course” will begin in two weeks. Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday, and so we will focus on that important day in our Christian Calendar next Sunday. But, beginning with the first Sunday in June, we will begin our “Christianity 101” course.

For many of you, this will be a refresher course, reviewing scriptural truths you may have once known, but have since forgotten. For others, it may be the first time you have seriously thought about the basics of the Christian faith and taken them to heart. In either case, I hope that you will make it a point to participate every Sunday as we embark on a spiritual journey together, to re-acquaint ourselves with the Scriptural basics of the Christian faith as outlined by our denomination’s founder, John Wesley.

Today’s message is something a pre-quel to that series of sermons, a teaser, if you will. Today, I want to introduce you to the founder of our Methodist movement, John Wesley, whose “Path of Salvation” we will be examining over the next couple of months. His faith journey informed his theology – and it all sprung from an encounter with the Risen Christ – his own Pentecost experience – that occurred on May

24, 1738. Today, of course is the anniversary of that important event - what has been called, Wesley's "Aldersgate Experience," – precisely 282 years ago today. His faith journey blazes a trail for our own. So now, let's begin our journey together.

In fact, that is exactly what I'd like for us to think about this morning – Journeys.

Do you like to travel? I know I do. Before I got married (back when I was "foot-loose-and-fancy-free"), travelling was one of my favorite past-times. In my short life up to that point, I had traveled in at least 28 countries – in North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. I love to visit different and exciting places. But, just as much as I love to BE in a foreign land, I think I enjoy almost as much the process of getting there.

It is exciting to travel. Before you go on a journey, you must make plans, choose your itinerary, arrange for your flight, get your passport, and pack your suitcases. Then, it's off to the airport to be transported into a great adventure – to leave behind the old familiar world, and arrive in a new and exciting place, full of amazement and opportunity. Yes, for me, the joy is not JUST in the destination – it is in the journey, itself.

You know, in much the same way, FAITH is a journey. Like my travels to distant lands, the "joy" of faith isn't merely in the destination, as wonderful as that is. A great deal of the joy of faith can be found in the journey itself.

As A. W. Tozer once said, "Faith is not merely a journey for the feet, but it is a journey for the heart."

Consider with me for a moment a couple of examples from the Scriptures of people who experienced faith as a journey, not only a physical journey, but a journey of the heart:

In the Book of Genesis, you remember how God called Abraham to set out on a journey of faith – to leave the land that he knew and loved and "step out in faith" toward a "promised land" which God had vowed to show him. Throughout Abraham's lifetime (and the generations that followed), the "promised land" seemed an elusive dream, which in many ways, is still unrealized today.

But, you see, the joy for Abraham was NOT so much in reaching the destination, as it was in the remarkable journey of the heart that led Abraham and his descendants into a relationship with their God! Abraham's faith was formed along the journey.

In the New Testament, we see a different example of faith that is developed along a journey. One day, Jesus called some fishermen, saying, "Follow Me." One of those fishermen was Simon Peter. If you know much about Peter's life, you know that, when he left his nets, he didn't have a clue where this new journey might take him. Peter's faith was not fully realized that day he decided to follow the rabbi from Nazareth. In fact, Peter's faith wasn't even fully mature at the time of Jesus' resurrection from the dead! It wasn't until the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost that Peter finally reached the destination of his journey of faith, and his life was never the same again.

You see what I mean? Faith is a journey.

There are some Christian traditions that like to see the achievement of faith as a one-time experience – one moment in life. Before that instant, you had no faith, after that instant you have full-blown faith.

That is one way that Methodism is different from some other Christian traditions. Yes, we emphasize a moment of conversion and coming to faith. But we ALSO recognize that, like Abraham and Peter, FAITH IS A JOURNEY to be traveled – a journey led and prompted by the “amazing grace” of God through the working of the Holy Spirit.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, believed that faith is a journey. For him, this was not some academic theory. It was a reality, based on his own spiritual walk.

Wesley was born in 1703 in Epworth, England, the 15th of 19 children. His father, Samuel, was the parish priest of the village, and his mother, Suzanna, would become his spiritual mentor throughout his life.

John was a child of exceptional promise. He learned Greek and Latin, and became well-versed in the Bible at a very young age. He studied at Oxford and became a priest in the Church of England, along with his brother, Charles.

As young men, John and Charles were very serious about their practice of Christianity – however, they lacked the JOY of faith. The brothers got up at 4 a.m. every morning for study and prayers, visited in the prisons and with the sick and dying, helped poor families, and ran a small school. They formed a group of serious like-minded young men at the University who devoted themselves to this very regimented and disciplined Christian lifestyle.

On campus, they began to be ridiculed by the other students who called their group all kinds of unflattering names: Bible Bigots, Bible Moths, The Enthusiasts, and The Holy Club. One of the names of derision was “The Methodists.” The label stuck, and was to become the official name of John Wesley’s followers, of which there are nearly 75 million around the world today.¹

Still, despite their deep commitment to Christ’s mission, John and Charles did NOT know the joy of the faith.

By this time, their father, Samuel, was aging, and he wanted his son, John, to return to Epworth to replace him as the village priest. John declined. Instead, he and Charles were given the opportunity to sail to America with General Oglethorpe to help strengthen the British hold on the new colony of Georgia. John was to be the chaplain of the colony, and had visions of converting the Indians to Christianity. Charles served as General Oglethorpe’s personal secretary.

On the trip across the Atlantic, something happened that proved to have a profound impact on John Wesley’s life. A great storm came up and threatened to sink their ship (isn’t it interesting how so many faith stories include storms at sea?). John was scared to death. But on that boat were also a small group of German Moravian Christians. Wesley was amazed at their calm and composure as they sang psalms until the storm passed. He wanted that kind of joy and peace for himself. But it wasn’t time yet for Wesley.

Soon after he came ashore at St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, John was asked some challenging questions by one of the Moravian preachers: “Do you know Jesus Christ?” John wasn’t sure how to answer, but he finally said, “I know he is the Savior of the world.” “True,” said the Moravian, “but do you know he has saved YOU?” John was taken aback, and replied that he DID believe Jesus had saved him – but he knew in his heart that wasn’t true.

John was a miserable failure as a missionary to Georgia. His austere joyless approach to religion caused him to be ineffectual among those in the colony as well as among the Indians. So he returned to England, defeated and disillusioned. He wrote in his journal: "I went to America to convert the Indians. But, oh! Who shall convert ME?"

Then on May 24, 1738, John finally discovered the joy he had been lacking. In his journal, this is what he wrote: "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."

John and his brother Charles (who, by the way, had had his own "heart-warming experience" only a few days before), went on to preach to the poor and forgotten masses in England, and sparked a spiritual-awakening in the British Isles that eventually spread to America, as well.

John became one of the greatest preachers of all time, and the organizational genius behind the Methodist movement. His brother, Charles, took John's message of God's grace and set it to hymn poetry. Throughout his life, Charles penned some 6,500 hymns, many of which are among the most beloved hymns of all times, sung by Christians of all denominations, everywhere.

John rode all over Great Britain on horseback, covering nearly a quarter of a million miles. In 54 years of ministry, John preached 42,000 sermons. In fact, in his final preaching tour in the last year of his life, John Wesley preached in 96 places – at the age of 87!

On March 2, 1791, John finally completed his faith journey. His last words from his death-bed were these: "The best of all is – God is with us! Farewell!"

As you can see, John Wesley experienced the power of God's grace all along his journey of faith, and this had a huge influence on his teaching and preaching. Wesley outlined a Path of Salvation – a journey of faith each person must travel along their spiritual journey – just as he had done - a journey that leads to a "heart strangely warmed."

These "steps" along the Path of Salvation will be the subject of each of the sermons of our series, beginning June 7th. They are: Original Sin, Prevenient Grace, Redemption, Justification, Rebirth, Assurance, Sanctification, and Social Holiness.

My friends, no matter where you are in your own faith journey – nearing the finish-line; struggling along the path; or just taking your first steps – remember that you are not traveling alone. God's Holy Spirit has you by the hand and wants to lead you along the "Path of Salvation," just as he led Abraham, and Peter, and John Wesley.

So plan to participate each Sunday, and be led by the Spirit along YOUR journey of faith – until you can say with John Wesley: "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."

Oh, may it be so – for you – and for me!

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodist>