

JOHN NICHOLSON **The Place Of Prayer Is A Precious Habitation**



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John Nicholson

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THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

...is composed of seekers, mainly, but not exclusively members of the Religious Society of Friends. QUF seeks to promote open dialogue on its issues of interest. It writes in its statement of purpose:

While being convinced of the validity of our own religious paths, we not only accept but rejoice that others find validity in their spiritual traditions, whatever they may be. Each of us must find his or her own path, and each of us can benefit for the search of others.

In the selection of both its speakers and manuscripts, QUF tries to implement those ideas.

Notes:

All quotations except 24 are taken from *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Philip Moulton, Oxford University Press, N.Y. N.Y., 1971.

1. p. 160
2. p. 23
3. p.25
4. p. 25
5. p. 25
6. p. 26
7. p. 27
8. p. 28
9. p. 27
10. p. 29
11. p. 32
12. p. 53
13. p. 62
14. p. 91-92
15. p. 93
16. p. 190
17. p. 121
18. p. 129
19. p. 127
20. p. 133
21. p. 178
22. p. 303
23. p. 305
25. p. 160
24. *True Harmony of Mankind: The Journals and Essays of John Woolman*. Ed. Amelia Gummere. Macmillan, N.Y. N.Y. 1922. p.12

wait, to prepare, to escape self, living in that center which gives meaning to our being.

In closing I would like to share one more quote. To me it is Woolman's triumphant vision of the Kingdom of God which is ever present.

"The place of prayer is a precious habitation, for I now saw that the prayers of the saints was precious incense. And a trumpet was given me that I might sound forth this language, that the children might hear it and be invited to gather... before the throne of God and the lamb. I saw this habitation to be safe, to be inwardly quiet, when there were great stirrings and commotions in the world. Prayer at this day in pure resignation is a precious place. The trumpet is sounded; the call goes forth to the church that she is to gather to the place of pure inward prayer, and her habitation is safe. "25

John Nicholson is a birthright Friend and the long-time head of the Westtown School middle school. He was the principal speaker at a Quaker Universalist Fellowship gathering at London Grove Meeting, Pennsylvania, on November 9, 1991. The topic of the gathering was "Listening Within: Prayer as a Resource."

It was the organizers of the gathering who suggested that John Woolman's Journal might be a useful point of departure for a consideration of the subject of prayer. John Nicholson faithfully carried out the assignment, at the same time calling attention in several places to elements in Woolman's thought that have contributed to the universalist stream in the religious thought of the Society of Friends.

Throughout his life John Woolman was centered in what he describes as a precious “habitation of prayer¹,” seeking to live God’s will and overcome the subtle, and at times not so subtle, urgings of self will. His writings reflect a prayer-filled life, as he seeks forgiveness, guidance and support as well as expressing thanksgiving and praise.

Born in 1720, John Woolman was the fourth in a family of thirteen children, where attendance at meeting for worship and reading the Bible and other religious literature was the norm. He became at an early age “acquainted with the operations of divine love.”² Yet there were many times when he strayed. Once, having “behaved amiss to his mother”³ and being firmly corrected by his father, he felt remorse and “prayed to the Lord... for forgiveness.”⁴ Describing his early youth, he continues, “I perceived a plant in me which produced much wild grapes” and became “more and more alienated from the Truth.”⁵ Following admonitions from his parents he sought solace in prayer, but as he said, “not getting deep enough to pray rightly, the tempter when he came found entrance.”⁶ Sometime later he writes, “I prayed humbly to the Lord for his help that I might be delivered from all these vanities which so ensnared me. Thus brought low, he helped me, and as I learned to bear the cross, I felt refreshment come from his presence.”⁷

Secure in his faith, he “kept steadily to meetings, spent First Day afternoons chiefly readings the scriptures and other good books and was easily convinced... that true religion consisted in an inward life, wherein the heart doth love and reverence God the creator and learns to exercise true justice and goodness.”⁸ Also he found no narrowness reflecting sects and opinions but believed that “sincere

love. And if I put forth my strength in an employ which I know is to support pride, I feel it has a tendency to weaken those bonds which, through the infinite mercies of God, I have felt at times to bind and unite my soul in a holy fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.”²⁴ He urges us to be “clear” of self, “digging deep,” going beyond self-interest. For Woolman, for all of us, honest prayer requires a negation of self.

Then there is continual preparation through practice, reading and study. As to practice, Woolman’s writings reflect a life of almost continual prayer. It is interesting to note that earlier in his *Journal* he often speaks of prayer, while later on his writing reflects the spirit of prayer, rather than using the word itself, an indication of ever-growing spiritual maturity. John Woolman was a prolific reader. The Bible was a constant companion. In his writings there are some 700 quotations from both the Old and New Testaments.

In some of the passages the word order is slightly different, indicating he was probably quoting from memory, most certainly writing under the guidance of that Spirit which gave forth the original. He kept a lending library and was familiar with such authors as Eusebius (an early Christian Father), Thomas à Kempis, Jacob Boehme and other 15th and 16th century mystics, as well as with the Quaker writers George Fox, Robert Barclay, William Penn and Isaac Pennington. Such reading gave insight, reference and spiritual support.

Finally, we need to divest ourselves of the distractions and cumber that cloud the working of the spirit, and wait patiently for the answers that come in God’s time, not ours. Patient resignation in love can lead us to understanding that the answer is God’s, not ours. Unfortunately we are not in a world accustomed to patience. Days are tightly scheduled; many are the demands. Yet some find time to

chief (Papunehang) spoke to one of the interpreters, and I was afterward told that he said in substance as follows: "I love to feel where the words come from."²⁰

From this point on, the Journal reflects even more a life centered on inward prayer, as illustrated by his thoughts on shipboard prior to landing in England in the spring of 1772. He writes, "I felt like a motherless child; and my cries were put up to my heavenly Father for preservation, that in a humble dependence on him my soul may be strengthened is his love and kept inwardly waiting for his counsel."²¹

In York, England, he became ill and died of smallpox. Those at his bedside offered what comfort they could to relieve his pain and suffering. Faithful to the end, Woolman was recorded as saying, "This trial is made easier than I could have thought, by my will being taken away, for if I were anxious as to the event it would be harder. But I am not, and my mind enjoys a perfect calm."²² Again, nearer the end, "I sorrow not, though I have had some painful conflicts. But now they seem over and matters all settled, and I look at the face of my dear Redeemer, for sweet is his voice and his countenance comely."²³

I am aware of four significant factors that shaped his life of prayer. First of all, there must be a center wherein prayer is grounded. Such a focus is described by John Woolman in his essay, *The True Harmony of Mankind*. "I feel it my duty to love my heavenly Father with all my soul and with all my strength. This I have learned through the precious operation of divine love, and ardently desire both for myself and for all who have tasted of it, that nothing may separate us from it."²⁴

The next is perhaps the most difficult factor, the surrender of will. This has already been mentioned several times, and in the same quotation from *The True Harmony of Mankind*, one finds, "I feel that pride is opposite to Divine

upright people in every society who truly loved God were accepted of Him."⁹ Yet there were still temptations, and often he would withdraw to a private place and with tears beseech the Lord for help, knowing God a "gracious ear open to [his] cry."¹⁰

Recognizing that inner faith requires outward response, he became increasingly sensitive to actions and attitudes not consistent with Divine Principle. Consequently he was firm with himself and tender with others when asking them to reconsider actions out of keeping with God's will. In his youth this was particularly difficult, for at times he felt called to approach persons who were older. He writes, "The exercise was heavy, and I besought the Lord for His assistance, who in loving kindness gave me a resigned heart"¹¹ So in seeking the support of the Lord with prayer and tears, he followed as he was led. Such confrontations, for the most part, were successfully carried out with both parties remaining comfortable with each other.

For Woolman, prayer entered into all aspects of life. Starting out as an apprentice to a tailor, he eventually came to own his own store. In time his business increased, and the roads to considerable success seemed assured. Yet, as he would say, "I felt a stop in my mind. The increase of business became my burden, for though my natural inclination was toward merchandising, yet I believed Truth required me to live more freely from outward cumber, and there was a strife in my mind between the two; and in this exercise my prayers were put up to the Lord, who graciously heard me and gave me a heart resigned to his holy will."¹² Consequently, he sold his business, continued his tailoring, and also kept a small orchard. By such action he was freed to travel more extensively in the ministry.

For nineteen years he traveled over thirty times through the colonies from New England to Carolina, demonstrating

the power of a God-centered life. Many of these travels were prompted by his recognition of the evils of slavery and a concern for its abolition. This was difficult, for it was a well-established practice, and for many it involved considerable financial investment. It was difficult to encounter time and time again so many who sought to justify what he saw to be an evil institution. Not only was it evil for slaves, but also for the owners. It was difficult to give those he visited payment when he realized that slave labor had provided his food and comfort. It was difficult to ride many miles over poor roads, often in inclement weather. It is hardly surprising that he writes, "As I was riding along this morning, my mind was deeply affected in a sense I had need of divine aid to support me... and in an uncommon distress of mind I cried in secret to the most high, 'Oh Lord be merciful, I beseech thee, to thy poor afflicted creature.' After some time I felt inward relief."¹³

Looking forward to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting sessions of 1758, John Woolman was hopeful that at long last the issue of slave-holding by members of that body would be resolved according to his satisfaction. However, his *Journal* states, "My mind was often drawn to retire alone and put up my prayers to the Lord that he would be graciously pleased to strengthen me, that setting aside all views of self-interest and the friendship of this world, I might stand fully resigned to his holy will."¹⁴ God's will was active, for the meeting passed a minute stating in effect that liberty was the "Negro's right."¹⁵

Believing that dyes were "invented partly to please the eye and hide the dirt,"¹⁶ and that some dyes were "hurtful" to the cloth, around the age of forty he started to consider the wearing of undyed clothing. However, he knew his attire would be markedly different and that people might well look upon him as one who was affecting a "singularity." Once

again he was confronted with the distracting urgings of self will and in prayer would ask God to give "him a heart resigned to the directions of his wisdom." Shortly thereafter he writes, "I trusted the Lord would support me in the trials that might attend singularity."¹⁷ Subsequently he purchased a white hat, having "the natural color of the fur." The response to this "singularity" at meeting was difficult, as he expected, and he was equally troubled by those who thought in wearing the undyed hat he was submitting to the latest fashion! He writes, "I felt my way for a time shut up in ministry. And in this condition, my mind being turned toward my Heavenly Father with fervent cries that I might be preserved to walk before him in the meekness of wisdom, my heart was often tender in meetings, and I felt an inward consolation, which to me was very precious under those difficulties."¹⁷

Knowing that God had equal regard for all people,¹⁸ in 1763 he acted on a concern to spend some time with Indians some 200 miles northwest of Philadelphia, so that he "might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in" and "receive some instruction from them"¹⁹ He well knew the dangers involved. Not only would travel conditions be difficult, but there were still tensions resulting from colonial expansions, and the recently concluded French and Indian Wars had left some Indians still on the warpath. Characteristically he turned to the Lord, seeking heavenly support to follow as he was led.

It was at the Indian village of Wyalusing on the East Branch of the Susquehanna where the Spirit broke through the barrier of language. As Woolman writes, "Feeling my mind covered with the spirit of prayer, I told the interpreters that I found it in my heart to pray and believed if I prayed right he would hear me, and expressed my willingness for them to omit interpreting; so our meeting ended with a degree of divine love. And before people went out I observed the