

GROUP LEADER GUIDE

The Cloud: George Whitefield

John 3:3-7



ANNOUNCEMENTS

- August 24 – Titus 2 Mentor Mixer
- August 29- Behold Weekend
- September 6- CU Football Tailgate

Check out the TJC Weekend Recap podcast for a more in-depth look at our sermons each week!

The podcast is available on all streaming platforms!

SERMON NOTES

I have waited for this day for 10 years. I don't want to build up in your mind too much because it's not going to be remarkably different to you than all the other Cloud series sermons. But for me, this is a special one. It was the story (particularly the biographies) of George Whitefield that inspired The Cloud series. It left such an impression on my heart when I read these biographies. When people ask me about my top books, I always mention these. So I'm really excited today to finally have the opportunity to talk about him with you all. How many of you are familiar with the life and ministry of George Whitefield?

He was an evangelist that God used to spark the Great Awakening on two continents. We're going to look at his story, but before we do, we're going to look at his driving message.

Scripture Exegesis: John 3:3-7

“Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” **4**Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” **5**Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. **6**That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7**Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

Nicodemus (a religious leader and teacher of the law) shows up to meet Jesus in the cover of night. He seeks out Jesus, trying to pin Him down and make sense of Him. Jesus makes an incredible

statement to him, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."**

This messes with Nicodemus' mind. How can someone be born again? How does this happen? Nicodemus thought about it purely from a human and physical standpoint (how can a man go back into the womb). But this is a spiritual thing. The new birth or regeneration is the work of the Spirit to bring men and women to saving faith in Christ. The new birth follows hearing (faith comes by hearing - Romans 10:17). Jesus didn't come to teach good morals. He didn't come to make you a better person. He didn't come teaching that you needed to try harder to get to Heaven. He came to make dead people alive. He came to save and redeem, but it requires a work of God. It requires a new birth.

STORY: Just this past week, President Trump made a remark about trying to stop the Russian/Ukraine war. He said if he gets to Heaven, this will be one of the reasons why. His faith counsel needs to do a better job. If he wants to go to Heaven, it isn't a mystery about what needs to happen. There isn't a war he can stop that will do it. He must be born again. He needs the saving grace of God.

The way any person goes to Heaven is to be reconciled to God. We are made by God and accountable to God. But we are sinners. We are born sinners, and we live out our sinful ways. But Christ has done a saving work to reconcile sinners who trust in Him. He died for our sins, taking our punishment, and rose from the dead. Sinners must be born again to believe. It is upon recognizing our sin, the accounting of our soul that must be given to God, and the necessity of the new birth that throws us onto the mercy of God.

This not only captures the salvation of George Whitefield, but it captures the heart of his message as he preached.

Biographical Sketch:

George Whitefield was born on December 16, 1714, in Gloucester, England, the youngest of seven children to Thomas and Elizabeth Whitefield. His father owned the Bell Inn, a local tavern, but died when George was just two years old. His widowed mother struggled to keep the inn afloat, and George grew up in modest circumstances, often feeling the sting of poverty.

From an early age, Whitefield displayed a natural gift for drama and speaking. He loved the theater and later confessed he was addicted to "lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting." That gift for performance later shaped his style as a preacher, where drama and passion were at the heart of his delivery.

In 1732, he entered Pembroke College, Oxford, working as a servitor (performing menial duties for wealthier students). There he met John and Charles Wesley, members of the “Holy Club.” Their rigorous disciplines of fasting, prayer, and service earned them the derisive nickname “Methodists.” Whitefield eagerly joined but remained burdened with the need for true conversion.

Whitefield’s true conversion came in 1735 when he read *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* by Henry Scougal. For the first time, he saw Christianity not as an external duty but as an inward reality: **“I must be born again or be damned!”** This conviction drove him into weeks of spiritual agony until he found peace in Christ. He described it as being **“perfectly reconciled to God by His blood.”** When Bishop Benson ordained him a deacon in 1736, Whitefield’s first sermon was so powerful that many listeners were in tears. Some clergy scoffed at the emotional reactions, but his voice and presence were unmistakable. Three years later, in 1739, he was ordained a priest in the Church of England. Though he always remained technically within the Church, his unorthodox methods soon put him at odds with many clergy.

Whitefield’s popularity grew quickly, and jealousy followed. Many Church of England pulpits were closed to him. Forced outside, he turned necessity into innovation. He began preaching in fields, streets, and marketplaces. His first open-air sermon in 1739 at Kingswood drew miners by the thousands. With coal-streaked faces, they listened intently, many moved to tears as Whitefield proclaimed the new birth.

His voice was legendary. Benjamin Franklin, his printer and friend, once calculated that 30,000 people could hear him clearly in Philadelphia. From that time forward, the world became his parish. It was Whitefield who gave John Wesley his start in outdoor preaching. Up until then, Wesley’s ministry was faltering—his Georgia mission had ended in humiliation, and his sermons in England drew little effect. But when Whitefield invited Wesley to preach to his massive field audiences, Wesley developed a following that would go with him for the rest of his life.

Whitefield had the evangelistic fire; Wesley had the organizational genius. After preaching, Whitefield would often leave town without building structures. Wesley, however, founded Methodist “societies,” small groups that nurtured converts and endured long after. This difference explains why Wesley’s Methodism became an enduring movement, while Whitefield’s legacy was less institutional but no less influential.

Whitefield crossed the Atlantic 13 times, preaching in England, Scotland, Wales, and the American colonies. He founded the Bethesda Orphan House in Georgia in 1740, one of America’s earliest

orphanages (still operating in Savannah, Georgia today), though it drained him financially his entire life.

In New England, his preaching helped ignite the Great Awakening. In 1740, he preached for Jonathan Edwards in Northampton. Edwards wept openly as he listened, later writing: “It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible.” Whitefield thundered against self-righteousness: “Works! Works! A man gets to heaven by works? I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand.”

Whitefield and the Wesleys, once close allies, clashed over theology. Whitefield, a Calvinist, preached God’s sovereign election, while John Wesley insisted on free will. The rift was bitter—Wesley even preached against Whitefield by name. But Whitefield responded with humility: “Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified.” As can often happen, the followers of Whitefield and the followers of Wesley were more brutal against each other than were Whitefield and Wesley themselves. On one occasion, Whitefield had a young disciple ask him, “Do you think we’ll see John Wesley in Heaven.” Whitefield responded back, “No, young man, I don’t suppose we will. He’ll be far too close to Jesus for us to get a look.”

By the end of his life, Whitefield had preached more than 18,000 sermons to an estimated 10 million hearers. He was the most famous preacher of his age, his voice and passion drawing unprecedented crowds. One critic said he could make people weep simply by pronouncing “Mesopotamia.” His friendship with Franklin revealed his broad influence. Franklin, though skeptical of Christianity, admired Whitefield deeply. He printed Whitefield’s journals and sermons, saying: “His integrity, disinterestedness, and indefatigable zeal in promoting every good work, I have never seen equaled.”

Whitefield married Elizabeth James, a widow from London, in 1741. Their marriage was strained; he once candidly admitted he married chiefly to have “a housekeeper.” They had no surviving children, and Elizabeth died in 1768, two years before George. Despite flaws—impulsiveness, poor financial management of the orphanage, and his tragic support of slavery—he also showed remarkable compassion, travelling to near exhaustion, pouring himself out for the poor, and preaching until his final breath.

On September 29, 1770, George Whitefield died at age 55 in Newburyport, Massachusetts. He had preached the night before, and by morning he was gone. He was buried under the pulpit of Old South Presbyterian Church. John Wesley, his one-time rival, honored him with the highest words: “Have we read or heard of any person since the Apostles, who testified the gospel of the grace of God through so wide a space, by his own labor?”

George Whitefield's life was one of paradox: ordained in the Church of England but often barred from its pulpits; a celebrity evangelist who left little institutional structure; a flawed man, yet a herald of Christ to millions. His friendship with Franklin, his influence on Wesley, and his meeting with Edwards root him in the very heart of the most influential revival in world history.

George Whitefield was not without enemies. Many clergy in the Church of England resented him — jealous of his massive crowds and uneasy with his emotional, theatrical style. They accused him of “enthusiasm,” a derogatory term that day for religious fanaticism. Pamphlets were printed mocking him, and mobs sometimes disrupted his outdoor sermons, throwing stones, dead cats, or worse. Even his fellow evangelicals opposed him at times — John Wesley sharply attacked his Calvinism, while critics accused him of being reckless with money at his orphanage in Georgia. Whitefield once admitted: *“I am content to wait till the judgment day for the clearing up of my character.”* Yet, in the midst of criticism and slander, he kept preaching Christ.

Above all, he never wanted the spotlight for himself. His chosen epitaph said it best: “Here lies George Whitefield; what sort of man he was, the great day will discover.”

Application:

1. The New Birth Is Essential

Whitefield hammered this truth again and again because people confused outward religion with inward transformation. Don't assume proximity to church, family heritage, or moral discipline equals salvation.

- Have you been born again by the Spirit of God?
- You may not have a time you remember it happening, but is there evidence you belong to Christ? (do you love Him, have gratitude for God's grace, obey Him, etc.)
- If you are not a believer, and you know you've yet to surrender to Christ, ask the Lord to do the work in your heart to bring faith

STORY: C. S. Lewis described his conversion as a quiet but decisive moment of new birth. He wrote that when he boarded a bus one morning on the way to the zoo, he was not a Christian. But by the time he arrived, he believed. In his words: “When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.” There were no fireworks, no dramatic visions—just the Spirit of God opening his heart to Christ. It's a vivid reminder that the “new birth” Whitefield thundered about can come suddenly and quietly, changing everything in an instant.

2. Even Great Servants of God Have Flaws

Whitefield's support of slavery, his strained marriage, and his financial struggles remind us he was deeply human. Don't idolize Christian leaders. Learn from their faith, but also from their failings. Only Christ is the perfect Savior.

It's also a reminder that you don't to wait until you've reached some fictional version of "perfect" or "ready"

to serve the Lord. Some of you need to get more involved in the church. Some of you need to be using your gifts or seeking more ways to leverage your life for Christ. Don't wait for perfection or let your weaknesses deceive you into never acting.

3. Make Your Life Count For God

Whitefield gave his life running hard to make Christ known and help others enter into the faith. The goal isn't to idolize George Whitefield or try to copy his race. It is to live out our own lives with faith and trust in the Lord, and to be used by Him as He outlined for us.

Friends, you don't have to be a great preacher, world traveler, or famous. You just need to put your "yes" on the table wherever God has placed you. The "yes" on the table means in every aspect of life: family, school, career, church, and more. Don't give Jesus a compartment of your life. Give Him your life. Let Him be the center and let everything orbit around Him like a planet around the sun.



- How was your week? What is one thing you're grateful for and one thing that challenged you?
- How did you grow in obedience to Christ over the last week?
- Where did you go to share the gospel or have a spiritual conversation with someone?
- What is a sin you have been struggling with that you need to repent of?



- **REVIEW**
 - Read John 3:3-7 and then have someone else in the group read it again, preferably from a different translation.
 - Additional Scripture

- Romans 10:17

- **DISCUSS**

Personal Reflection on the New Birth

1. Jesus told Nicodemus, “*You must be born again.*” How would you explain what it means to be “born again” to a nonbeliever?
2. Share 1-2 evidences of the Spirit’s regenerated works in your life that were not present before you were born again.

Learning from George Whitefield

3. Whitefield struggled for years with outward religion before realizing Christianity was about an inward reality. Why are we tempted to focus on the outside appearance instead of the internal transformation?
4. Whitefield used his natural gifts (drama, voice, storytelling) for the gospel. What natural gifts or passions might God have given you to leverage for His kingdom?
5. Whitefield faced jealousy, opposition, and even slander, yet kept preaching. How do you typically respond when criticized or misunderstood for your faith?

Flaws and Faith

6. Even great servants of God have flaws (Whitefield’s support of slavery, strained marriage, and poor finances). What does this teach us about following leaders, and about relying on Christ instead of people?
7. What weaknesses in your own life sometimes hold you back from serving the Lord? How might God want to use you *despite* them?

Application for Today

8. Whitefield once said, “*Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified.*” What would it look like for you to live with that kind of humility and Christ-centeredness in your daily life?

9. C. S. Lewis described his conversion as quiet but decisive. How do different testimonies (dramatic vs. quiet conversions) encourage and strengthen your faith?



- **BUILD UP | SEND OUT**
 - **How are you making yourself known at church this week?**
 - **How are you growing to know Christ better this week?**
 - **How are you making Christ known this week?**
- **PRAYER**
 - **Pray over any request from your group members.**
 - **Pray for our team:** Hunter Christian (Young Adult Director)
 - **Pray for our replanters:** Christ's Fellowship
 - **Pray for our short-term teams:**
 - Rome Team departing on November 15, 2025
 - Nashville Team departing on November 17, 2025
 - **Pray for our long-term units on the mission field:**
 - The Wilsons
 - The Grays
 - The Starks
 - **Pray for the unreached.** Want to keep up with Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>