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HOW THEY ENTERED CANAAN  
(A Collection of Holiness Experience Accounts)  
Compiled by Duane V. Maxey

Vol. I -- Named Accounts

**WILLIAM WATTERS**  
**1751 -- 1833**  
**The First American-Born Methodist Circuit Rider**

William Watters was the first American to join the ranks of Methodist itinerant preachers. After his conversion, one of Wesley's sermons, published by Robert Williams, led him into a still deeper spiritual experience, and he became a strong advocate, by his life as

#### HIS BIRTH IN 1751 AND EARLY LIFE

He was born in Baltimore county, Maryland on the 10th of October, 1751. His parents were strict members of the English Church, and from his infancy he was addicted to religious reflections. "At a very early period," he writes, "I well remember to have been under serious impressions at various times, but when about twelve or fourteen years old he took, he says, "great delight in dancing, card-playing, horse-racing, and such pernicious practices, though often terrified with thoughts of eternity in the midst of them. Thus did my precious time roll away while I was held in the chains of my sins, too often a willing captive of the devil. I had no one to tell me the evil of sin, or to teach me the way of life and salvation. The two ministers in the two parishes, with whom I was acquainted, were both immoral men, and had no gifts for the ministry; if they received their salary they appeared to think but little about the souls of the people. The blind were evidently leading the blind, and it was by the mere mercy of God that we did not all fall into hell altogether."

When sixteen or seventeen years of age he was considered by his associates "a very good Christian," but he thought of himself quite otherwise. "It was," he says, "my constant practice to attend the church with my prayer book, and to often read my Bible and other good books, and sometimes I attempted to say my prayers in private. Many times, when I have been sinning against God, I have felt much inward uneasiness, and often, on reflection, a hell within, till I could invent something to divert my mind from such reflections. Hence, strange as it may appear, I have left the dancing-room to pray to God that he might not be offended with me, and have then returned to it again with as much delight as ever."

## FIRST CONTACT WITH THE METHODISTS

Strawbridge, King, and Williams were abroad around him, preaching in private houses, and in 1770 he had frequent opportunities of hearing them. "I could not conceive," he writes, "what they meant by saying we must be born again, and, though I thought but little of all I heard, for some time, yet I dared not despise and revile them, as many then did. By frequently being in company with several of my old acquaintances, who had professed Methodism, among whom was my oldest brother and his wife, (who I thought equal to any religious people in the world,) and hearing them all declare, as with one voice, that they knew nothing of heart-religion, the religion of the Bible, till since they had heard the Methodists preach, I was utterly confounded; and I could not but say with Nicodemus, 'How can these things be?' While I was marveling at the unheard-of things that these strange people were spreading wherever they came, and before I was aware, I found my heart inclined to forsake many of my vain practices, and at the last place of merriment I ever attended, I remember well I was hardly even a looker-on. So vain did all their mirth appear to me, as did also their dancing, which I was formerly so fond of, that now no arguments could prevail on me to be seen on the floor. I had my reflections, though I was on the devil's ground; and, among others, while I was looking at a young man of property, who was beastly drunk and scarcely able to sit in his chair, a dog passed by, and I deliberately thought I would rather be that dog than a drunkard. Some, even of my friends, began to fear that I should become a Methodist; but I had no such thought, and yet I often found my poor heart drawn to them, as a people that lived in a manner I never had known any to live before."

## HIS CONVERSION

By the religious care of his early education and the natural tenderness of his conscience, it was impossible that he could long resist the Methodist influences which now met him on every side. "I seldom, if ever," he adds, "omitted bowing my sinful knees before the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, four or five times a day. It was daily my prayer that God would teach the way of life and salvation, and not suffer me to be deceived. After being uncommonly uneasy for several days concerning the state of my soul, I went with my eldest brother and family to a prayer-meeting in his neighborhood on a Sabbath day; and while one was at prayer I saw a man near me, whom I knew to be a poor sinner, trembling, weeping, and praying, as though His all depended on the present moment; his soul and body were in an agony. The gracious Lord, who works by what means he pleases, blessed this circumstance greatly to my conviction; so that I felt, in a manner which I have not words fully to express, that I must be internally changed, that I must be born of the Spirit, or never see the face of God. Without this, I was deeply sensible that all I had done or could do was vain. I went home much distressed, and fully determined, by the grace of God, to seek the salvation of my soul with my whole heart. In this frame of mind, I soon got by myself and full upon my knees. But, alas! my sinful heart felt as a rock, and though I believed myself in the 'gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity,' and, of course, that if I died in that state I must die eternally, yet I could not shed one tear, neither could I find words to express my wretchedness before my merciful high Priest; I could only bemoan my forlorn state, and I wandered about through the afternoon in solitary places, seeking rest but finding none."

That night, however, in another prayer-meeting, both his heart and eyes melted. "I was so melted down and blessed with such a praying heart, that I should have been glad if they would have continued on their knees all night in prayer for me, a poor, helpless wretch."

The next day he was unfit for any business: he spent it in retirement. "I refused to be comforted but by the Friend of sinners. My cry was, day and night, Save, Lord, or I perish; give me Christ, or else I die. In this state I loved nothing better than weeping, mourning, and prayer, humbly hoping, waiting, and longing for the coming of the Lord. For three days and nights eating, drinking, and sleeping in a measure fled from me while my flesh wasted away and my strength failed in such a manner that I found it was not without cause that it is asked, 'A wounded spirit who can heal?' Having returned in the afternoon from the woods to my chamber, my eldest brother (at whose house I was) knowing my distress, entered my room with all the sympathy of a brother and a Christian. To my great astonishment he informed me that God had that day blessed him with his pardoning love. After giving me all the advice in his power, he kneeled down with me, and with a low, soft voice (which was frequently interrupted by tears) he offered up a fervent prayer to God for my present salvation." He received "a gleam of hope," but was not content with it. The next day several "praying persons," who knew his distress, visited him. He requested them to pray with him, and the family was called in, though it was about the middle of the day. "While they all joined in singing, my face," he says, "was turned to the wall, with my eyes lifted upward in a flood of tears and I felt a lively hope that the Lord whom I sought would suddenly come to his temple. My good friends sung with the spirit and in faith. The Lord heard and appeared spiritually in the midst of us A divine light beamed through my inmost soul and in few minutes encircled me around, surpassing the brightness of the noonday sun. Of this divine glory, with the holy glow that I felt within my soul, I have still as distinct an idea as that I ever saw the light of the natural sun, but know not how fully to express myself so as to be understood by those who are in a state of nature, inexperienced in the things of God; for 'the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned.' My burden was gone, my sorrow fled, all that was within me rejoiced in hope of the glory God; while I beheld such fullness and willingness in the Lord Jesus to save lost sinners, and my soul so rested in him, that I could now, for the first time, call Jesus Christ 'Lord, by the Holy Ghost given unto me.' The hymn being concluded, we all fell upon our knees, but my prayers were all turned into praises."

Such was the spiritual birth of the first regular Methodist preacher of the new world. This "memorable change," he says, took place in May, 1771, in the twentieth year of his age. In the same house where he was born "a child of wrath," he was also "born a child of grace."

## HIS ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

He spent some time on the Pittsylvania Circuit, and the next year [1778] traveled with remarkable success that of Sussex. While passing the second time around this circuit his word had unusual power -- "the windows of heaven were opened, and the Lord poured out such a blessing as our hearts were not able to contain." Some of the rustic assemblies were overwhelmed with the truth. "We were so filled," he says on one occasion, "with the love of God, and overawed with his divine majesty, that we lay prostrate at his footstool, scarcely able to rise from our knees for a considerable time, while there were strong cries and tears from every part of the house for that

perfect love which casteth out fear." Jarratt and the devoted Methodist itinerants had preached faithfully, in these parts of Virginia, Paul's doctrine of "perfection," John's doctrine of "perfect love;" and Watters records that he had never met before with so many living examples of it as in the societies of this circuit. He caught from them the same spirit. "O my God! when shall I awake with thy likeness, and be filled with thy fullness!" was his constant prayer.

A new epoch here occurred in his personal history. He had been remarkable for his devotion, the transparent purity and simplicity of his religious life, and the benignity of his temper; but he had seen, especially by the aid of Wesley's Writings, that there were "deep things of God" which he had not fathomed, and he consecrated himself to an absolute devotion. In a little circle of praying friends, "I was," he says, "in an agony of prayer, and my heart was ready to burst with longing after the blessing, expecting every moment to hear the kind release, 'go in peace, sin no more.' My cry was incessant. 'Father, glorify thy name, pour out thy Spirit.' " Then "followed a deep and awful sense of the divine presence, an inward calm, which words cannot express. I was in my own eyes less than the least of God's people, and knew that all was of grace." But he dare not yet "confidently conclude" that his "soul was renewed in love."

Subsequently he "found that it is by faith we stand in every state of grace," that sanctification, like justification, is by faith. Walking with a friend, they retired into a solitary place, and on their knees most "earnestly desired not to rise till every doubt were removed." There, in the calm solitude, he was "most graciously and powerfully blessed and filled with confidence and peace." Powerful as his earnest ministry had hitherto been, it now took a new tone; its energy, if more calm, was more effective. The "most glorious work" that ever he "had seen was on this circuit among believers. Scores professed to be sanctified to the Lord;" he "could not be satisfied without pressing upon Christians their privilege "in this respect, and he records that wherever "they were exhorted to go on to perfection the Word was blessed."

Source: "William Watters, First American Circuit Rider" compiled by Duane V. Maxey from the writings of Nathan Bangs, Abel Stevens, and Matthew Simpson

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