

Primary Source: Nathan Cole and the First Great Awakening

A religious movement known as the Great Awakening swept through the thirteen colonies during the 1730s and 1740s. This Evangelical movement preached a personal relationship with God and freer, less rigid, religious practices than the many of the colonists were familiar with from the Church of England. One of the best known religious leaders of the period was George Whitefield. Whitefield was a Methodist missionary and a circuit rider who visited all thirteen colonies -- riding more than 5,000 miles and reaching as much as a quarter of the colonies' population with his message in just fifteen months. His revivals drew large crowds, as many as 25,000 in Boston and 12,000 in Philadelphia, and ignited great change in Colonial religious life.

One of the members of the crowd when Whitefield preached in Middletown, Connecticut in 1740 was a man by the name of Nathan Cole. A carpenter and farmer, Cole was greatly impacted by the egalitarian message of Whitefield's sermon. Cole's words capture the experience of many who were spiritually ignited during the Great Awakening. Excerpts of his manuscript detailing his conversion are transcribed below; italicized headings have been added for clarity.

George Whitefield at Middletown

Now it pleased God to send Mr. Whitefield into this land; [and my hearing of his preaching at Philadelphia](#) like one of the [Old apostles](#), and many [thousands flocking to hear him preach the gospel](#); and great numbers were converted to Christ; I felt the Spirit of God drawing me by conviction; I longed to see and hear him, and wished he would come this way. I heard he was come to New York and [the Jerseys](#) and great multitudes flocking after him under great concern for their Souls which brought on my Concern more and more hoping soon to see him but next I heard he was at Long Island; then at Boston and next at Northampton.

Then on a Sudden, in the morning about 8 or 9 of the Clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at ten of the Clock, I was in my field at Work, I dropt my tool and I had in my hand an ran home to my wife telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, then run to my pasture for my horse with all my might; fearing that I should be too late; having my horse I wish my wife soon mounted the horse and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear, and when my horse got much out of breath I would get down and put my wife on the Saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not Stop or Slack for me except I bad her and so I would run until I was much out of breath; and then mount my horse again, and so I did several times to favour my horse; we improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives; all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the Sermon, [for we had twelve miles to ride double in little more than an hour](#) and we went round by the upper housen parish.

On the Road to the Sermon

And when we came within about half a mile or a mile of the Road that comes down from Hartford, Wethersfield and Stepney to Middletown; on high land I saw before me a Cloud or fogg rising; I first thought it came from the great River, but I came near the Road, I heard a noise something like a low rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of Horses feet coming down the Road and this Cloud was a Cloud of dust made by the Horses felt; it arose some [Rods](#) into the air over the tops of Hills and trees and when I came within about 20 rods of the Road, I could see men and horses Slipping along in the Cloud like shadows and as I drew nearer it seemed like a steady Stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than a length behind another, all of [a Lather and foam with sweat](#), their breath rolling out of their nostrils every Jump; every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of Souls; it made me tremble to see the Sight, [how the world was in a Struggle](#) I found a Vacancy between two horses to Slip in min and my wife said law our cloths will be all spoiled see how they look, for they were so Covered with dust, [that they looked almost all of a Colour Coats, hats, shirts, and horses](#).

The Crowd

We went down in the Stream but heard no man speak a word all the way for 3 miles but every one pressing forward in great haste and when we got to Middletown old meeting house there was a great multitude it was said to be 3 or 4000 of people Assembled together; we dismounted and shoo[k] off our Dust; and the ministers were then Coming to the meeting house; I turned and looked towards the Great River and saw the ferry boats Running swift backward and forward brin[g]ing over loads of people and the Oars rowed nimble and quick; every thing men horses and boats seemed to be Struggling for life; The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses all along the 12 miles I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone.

Whitefield Speaks

When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the Scaffold he lookt almost angelical; a young, Slim, slender, youth before some

thousands of people with a bold undaunted Countenance, and my hearing how God was with him every where he came along it Solemnized my mind; and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was [Cloathed with authority from the Great God](#) and a sweet [sollume](#) solemnity sat upon his brow And my hearing him preach, gave me a [heart wound](#); By Gods blessings: my old [Foundation](#) was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me; [then I was convinced of the doctrine of Election](#) and went right to quarrelling with God about it; because that all I could do would not save me; and he had decreed from Eternity who would be saved and who not.

Made for Heaven or for Hell?

I began to think I was not Elected, and that God made some for heaven and me for hell. And I thought God was not Just in so doing, I thought I did not stand on even Ground with others, if as I thought; I was made to be damned; My heart then rose against God exceedingly, for his making me for hell; [Now this distress lasted Almost two years](#): - Poor – Me – Miserable me. – It pleased God to bring on my Convictions more and more, and I was loaded with guilt of Sin, I saw I was undone for ever; I carried Such a weight of Sin in my breast or mind, that it seemed to me as I should sink into the ground every step; and I kept all to my self as much as I could; [I went month after month mourning and begging for mercy](#), I tried every way I could think to help my self but all was failed : - Poor me it took away most all of my Comfort of eating, drinking, Sleeping, or working. Hell fire was most always in my mind; and I have hundreds of times put my fingers into my pipe when I have been smoaking to feel how fire felt: And to see how my Body could bear to lye in Hell fire for ever and ever. Now my countenance was sad so that others took notice of it.

"Forsake everything that was Sinful"

... [I made a great Resolution that I would forsake every thing that was Sinfull](#); And do to my uttermost ever thing that was good; And at once I felt a calm in my mind, and I had no desire to any thing that was sin as I thought; [But here the Devil thought to Catch me on a false hope](#), for I began to think that I was converted, [for I thought I felt a real Change in me](#). But God in his mercy did not leave me here to perish; but in the space of ten days I was made to see that I was yet in the [Gall of bitterness](#); my Convictions came on again [more smart than ever](#) – poor me-

At the Very Mouth of Hell

There was then a very Mortal disease in the land, the fever and the bloody flux; and I was possesst with a notion that if I had it I would die and goe right to hell, but I presently had it and very hard too: then my heart rose against God for making me for hell, when he might as well have made me for heaven; or not made me at all: - Poor me – Oh that I would be a Dog or a toad or any Creature but Man : I thought that would be a happy change for they had no Souls and I had. Oh what will become of me was the language of my mind; for now I was worse than ever, my heart was as hard as a Stone: my Eyes were dry, once I could weep for my Self but now cannot shed one tear; I was as it were in the very mouth of hell. The very flashes of hell fire were in my Mind; Eternity before me, and my time short here. Now when all was failed me then I longed to be annihilated; or to have my Soul die with my body; but that way failed too. Hell fire hell fire ran Swift my mind an[d] my distemper grew harder and harder upon me, and my nature was just wore out – Poor me – Poor Soul.

Saved by Christ

...One day as I went out into my field to work when I went out of my door, I fell into a prayer and continued so until I cam[e] to the place of my work and [then I had a glorious Sight](#) It seemed as if I really saw the gate of heaven [by an Eye of faith](#), and the way for Sinners to Get to heaven by Jesus Christ; as plan as ever I saw anything with my bodily eyes in my life, I looked round to see if I could see any poor Creature; I thought that I could almost point and shew them the straight way to heaven by Jesus Christ: [I saw what free Grace was](#); I saw how stubborn and willful man was; [I saw it was nothing but accepting of Christ's Righteousness and the match was made](#); [I saw I was saved by Christ](#), Here I thought I had [the sealings of the holy Ghost](#); and here I had evidence clear what I saw here is unspeakable, I could do no work here but lay down for want of bodily Strength until the view was a little abated...

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