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Biography of Elder John A. Whiteley

I was born in Pulaski County, Kentucky, on April 4, 1818, and was the twelfth of fifteen born to Thomas and Winifred Whiteley. They were Old School Baptists and as far back as I can remember my father was a minister. My mother died in Washington County, Indiana, and we moved in 1827 to Clay county, Illinois, and there father married a widow Bishop, and remained until his death.

At that time - the time of the Black Hawk war - there were only one hundred men in the county, fifty of whom volunteered to fight the Indians, and hence, in so new a country, I had no opportunity of an education. It was but a little while after father moved there before four churches were constituted - Crooked Creek, Salem, Skillet Fork, and Four Mile Prairie - of which churches he was the pastor until his death, after which Elder Cyrus Wright took charge of them.

A little while prior to father's death there was a great revival in the country, in which he baptized twelve at one time in Crooked Creek Church, and I was looking on. Before that time I had thought but little about a future life, being only about fifteen years old. Raised by religious parents I thought I was as good as any, for I had never used bad language, and that if I wanted religion I could easily get it, for all I had to do was to ask and it would be given.

When I heard Christians tell how happy they felt when they obtained a hope, and afterwards had such trials as they had, I thought if I ever got religion I would get a better kind that would keep me from doing anything wrong whatever, and that no other kind was of any use at all. I remained of that notion until these twelve were baptized. Of that number, one made such a hard struggle against it that I thought it was the wickedest act that mortal man could be guilty of, and I thought that my heart was as bad as his! It was such a shock that I

could not stay, but ran away through the weeds out of sight - for awhile, and on the way home sorrowing and sighing to think that the heart of man was so hard.

When we got home I told father he had baptized a bad man. After dinner he took me out and asked me why I thought so; I said I did not know, but I wished he had not baptized him. In a short while the man was excluded for misconduct. From that time I would, at times, become much troubled about my sinful state, but still thought I was not so very bad and that if I was called to die I had just as well wait until then to be troubled as to have it now; so I would throw it aside and stand my chance. This continued until father died and then my trouble became worse than ever before; to think that I had to be cast off without father or mother, brothers or sisters, to rely on for a living; for we were all hard run for a living. I had nearly no education and to be on the mercy of others, not knowing what would be my lot in time or eternity! O, Lord, my feelings I can't express! The poet expressed my desires:

"O, that I had some secret friend, to tell my secrets to,
Oh whose advice I might depend, in everything I do."

I started with my brother to Fulton County, Illinois, and stopped on the way and went to school two months, worked out expenses, and going on, landed in Bernadotte without a cent, and hired to strangers who treated me well.

In a few days my mind became again very heavily laden, which led me in prayer to God that he would have mercy on a poor sinner condemned to die! I thought if I had my father back, he would tell me how I could do and pray for me and that God would hear me and give peace to my troubled soul.

I tried to be good and do well the best I could, and instead of getting better, I got worse all the time. When I tried to pray, I could not pray like others, for I could only cry for mercy all the time, seeing myself such a great sinner. I went to hear the different orders preach, and some would tell me one way, and some another, and I had tried them all and failed, and so came to the conclusion that mine was an outside case, and I would be lost, because it was a failure on my part. At last I heard a Universalist preach and I thought there was yet a chance for me and that I would live a good life and all would be well with me in the end. But I soon found myself in vice and folly again and trouble hanging over me.

I now thought to get a home of my own and settle down, then I would feel better and not so sad and cast down all the time, and then I could easier live a Christian life. I married a Miss Nancy C. Walters, in Fulton County, and went to work on a Congress homestead, intending to live that good life. I commenced reading the Scriptures to prove the Universalist plan of salvation to all. I soon began to fear lest it might not be true, or I would feel better than I did.

All the time I had an aching heart and death was a terror to me, more or less, all the time. I got so troubled that I had little rest day or night. I read the Bible through to learn religion, and that true and undefiled religion before God was to visit the fatherless and the widow in their afflictions and to keep unspotted from the world. I then resolved to do that (what I had read), for I felt that I could and would as long as I lived, so I rested contented a few days.

In a short time I heard of a sick child, and my vow had gone forth to God that I would live that life; so I stopped my plough and started to the child, and on my

way these words came with power, "keep thyself unspotted from the world." Reader, here let me say to you that right there the sin of the world seemed resting on me. As soon as I could I went back to work, believing I had to die unprepared. My tongue would fail to tell my feelings at that time, instead of going to work, I went to the lonesome woods to try to pray one time more. I was afraid to kneel down lest I could never rise again, because I was so vile! My cry was, O, Lord, save or I perish! I became so weak in body and mind that I lay down to die, believing that my condemnation was just.

After awhile my strength returned and I went to the house and taking the Bible, read that every knee shall bend, and I promised the Lord if he would let me live till night I would fall on my knees and humble myself before him. Night came on and I went to bed to wait until my wife got asleep so I could hide in some secret place. When I could rest no longer I started for the woods to find a hiding place and I went until I could go no farther, and dropping on one knee on the ground I cried, O, Lord, have mercy on me a sinner! I rose up feeling worse than ever, for I was too vile to bow my knee to a a thrice-Holy God.

I went back again and found the night long, wearisome and sleepless, and rising early, I wondered why I had been spared till day.

While standing in the east door, the sun arose bright and clear, and it seemed to say to me, "You see that sun in its beauty and glory! At noon it will veil itself in darkness in token of your death, unprepared!" Oh, what a thought! I gave up as a lost and undone sinner. I struggled to pass it off as a freak of the imagination, but the more I strove to wave it, the worse I felt.

During the entire forenoon I was in deep distress, and at noon a dark cloud overshadowed the sun, and I felt it was a true token that I would go down with it. I couldn't eat when dinner came, and being very poor and having two little children, I thought I would go to my father-in-law, who was a good liver, and introduce the subject of death in a casual way, and ask him in case I should be suddenly called away in death, to see that my wife and children did not come to want.

I mounted my horse and started, the cloud yet over the sun, and when about half way, this Scripture came to my mind: He that prayeth in secret shall be rewarded openly." I decided if I could find a place that I would try to pray one more time. In a deep ravine stood a little oak covered with a grape vine under which I had been to eat grapes whilst out hunting deer. To that place I started with an aching heart and when I saw the bush my heart failed me and I turned away in sorrow, believing my doom was sealed. But, thank the Lord, in a moment my trouble was gone, the sun was shining in its beauty, and I was praising God in the highest strains.

Death was no more a terror to me; all was well. I could see Jesus hanging on the tree, bearing the sins of his people, as the only way, the truth, and the life; and if I ever had a call to preach it was then. I did believe that there was such a beauty in salvation by grace that I could tell it so that my comrades would forsake the world and follow Jesus, and I vowed I would tell it to the world.

The first time I saw one of my old associates I told him all about the exercises of my mind, and though he listened attentively, it seemed a dead letter to him, and I was ashamed that I said anything to him, and began to doubt for awhile my hope

in Christ, and thought I would never tell it again. But soon I became so pressed in mind to follow Christ that I had great trouble in trying to throw it aside. For a year I stayed away from meeting, fearing I would tell it to the church, and disgrace the church and the cause of Christ. I became the most miserable of men.

I went on in this way until October 1844, when I related my experience to the church at Little Flock, Fulton County, Illinois, and was baptized by Elder Thomas H. Owen. When I came up out of the water, it was with difficulty I kept from preaching to the people, and from that time on, for ten years, I fought as hard against it (preaching), I reckon, as any one ever did.

The church had no pastor, and I thought that perhaps that was why the impression to preach was so strong. Elder Wright moved in, but that did not relieve me. I became so troubled that I sold out and moved to Iowa to get rid of the impression. I tell you, brethren, that I honestly felt the least qualified of any man I had ever seen to fill so high a calling as preaching the gospel; being destitute of education, of a timid mind and too poor to go out amongst the higher class of people, I could not fill the place.

The first Baptist preacher I met with in Iowa was old Brother John Harper, and he told me I was a runaway, and I burst into tears saying, "I had paid all my debts, and owed no man anything." He said it was preaching; that impressions to preach was pressing me down in sorrow, and I could not deny it.

The first time I went to meeting the old brother called on me to close, which I did by saying, "the people may consider themselves dismissed." Brother Harper died in a short time, and the church was left without a pastor.

At the first meeting afterwards I proposed to the brethren to have no meeting on Sunday, but they would not agree to it. The next day came, and a house full of people and no one to speak. I asked for someone to conduct the meeting and no one would, so in much weakness I tried to sing and pray, and rising began to read a chapter, but soon stopped and began to talk, and the brethren said I stood near an hour, and it went forth that I had preached.

The church - Little Flock Church, Marion County, Iowa - then liberated me, I then determined to leave, and after trying a few more times, I sold out and went to Wayne County, where in a short time Hopewell Church was organized; and that day I tried to talk again and did not think they would call it preaching; but at the meeting, against my will, they licensed me, and at the May meeting 1853 I was ordained to the ministry by Elders Isaiah Guymon, John Martin, and Samuel Wilkes, after which I was soon called to the care of four churches. Since that time I have never had the care of less than three churches, and served as Moderator of three Associations, Siloam, Western, and Center Creek.

I am still in weakness laboring in the cause of, as I trust, my Master. I have tried to preach in five States and the Indian Territory. I have baptized a great many, some quite old people, one 73 and one 72 years old. I have assisted in the organization of many churches and the ordination of many ministers and deacons. I have had many crosses and trials to undergo, and have had many blessed seasons of enjoyment with my brethren and sisters in the Lord.

I am now in my sixty-eighth year and am quite feeble and feel that my departure

is near at hand, and my ministerial labors nearly ended.

May the good Lord still remember Zion and send faithful laborers into His vineyard, and may peace continue with his people everywhere, is the prayer of your unworthy brother in hope of eternal life - Elder John A. Whiteley.

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