



John Brainerd (1720-1781)

John Brainerd was born on February 28, 1720, in Haddam, Connecticut, to Hezekiah and Dorothy (Mason) Brainerd. The name Brainerd is well-known in Christian circles because of the work and journals of David Brainerd, but his brother John remains virtually unknown. Yet John Brainerd's life is a fascinating tale of dedication, resilience, and faith in the face of adversity. John was two years younger than David, and followed his brother to Yale College. Not long after John's graduation in 1746, David refers in his diary to his brother:

'April 10, 1847. Spent the forenoon in Presbyterian business. In the afternoon rode to Elizabeth town: found my brother John there, spent some time in conversation with him.'

When John knew that David was dying, he committed himself to take up his work of the evangelisation of the American Indians. The brothers were able to talk together of the vision they shared, before John set out for New Jersey, and David died at Jonathan Edwards' home in Northampton, Massachusetts. He had become friendly with the Edwards family, and it was Jonathan who prepared his diary for publication.

Conversations like the one with David helped John to realize what was going to be involved for him as his brother's successor as a missionary. He followed David as a worker under the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge. Later John read over David's diary, and on one occasion wrote that 'he could not but be affected at my own extreme barrenness and nonconformity to God. I saw that, although he was an imperfect man, I was very short of being what he was and doing what he did, which made me ashamed to look up'. He overstates the difference between himself and his brother, and while David only ministered for three years, John gave himself to the task for over thirty.

At first John Brainerd ministered to the Indians around Cranbury, New Jersey, commencing in April 1747. He was twenty-seven years old, and had practically no experience fitting him for his new work. The information he obtained from David helped, but really he learned very little about how to carry on his mission. The Indian settlement comprised approximately one hundred and sixty persons, thirty-seven of whom had been baptised and received as communicant members. The school had fifty-three children in attendance,

many of whom could read the Scriptures, recite from the Shorter Catechism, and they had spelling books and primers. From 1745, the Spirit of God had worked in the hearts of many of the Indians, and John Brainerd reported to the Scottish committee that 'the work of divine grace still went on among the Indians'. Whereas they had been used to idleness before the Gospel came to them, they were planting both English grain and Indian corn, and were evidently in a much more comfortable position than they had been.

Cranberry was near white settlements, and ungodly people often made life and ministry difficult for John Brainerd. In particular, the chief justice of the province was a problem for him. During his travels, John suffered at the hands of horse thieves, and also frequently from the harsh weather conditions. He also suffered some spiritual depression, and various physical ailments. The death of his wife and two children was a big blow. He left Cranberry for a time, but in 1762, the New Jersey governor persuaded him to return among the Indians. With that invitation came the promise that provision would be made for a home for him and a church meeting house, but the promises were never met.

He travelled widely on horseback, and often, like his brother David, rode through rough and very isolated territory. White traders were a problem, as they tried to convince the Indians that John was out to deceive them and take their property and belongings. He realised that many areas of white settlement in New Jersey lacked Gospel ministry, and from 1760 to 1770 he was constantly on the move, and in this period he preached over 500 times. His financial support from churches, or from the Scottish committee, was meagre. In addition to his full-time ministry to the Indians, he established seven preaching centres for European settlers.

With the official outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775, Brainerd was commissioned as a chaplain in the Continental Army. The part that chaplains played in the Revolutionary War and the profound impact they had on the lives of the soldiers who fought for American independence is only now being recognized and celebrated. Brainerd's life and ministry serve as a testament to the power of faith, hope, and love in the face of adversity, and his story stands as an inspiring example of selflessness and devotion to a cause greater than himself.

Towards the end of his ministry he wrote: 'I think, however, I have ground to hope that some good has been done among both Indians and white people, and the prospects of further usefulness are very considerable, if proper means could be used.' In declining health, he spent the last two years of his life as pastor in nearby Deerfield, and died, aged sixty-one, on March 18, 1781. In his birth-place of Haddam, people said that 'he was as holy a man as his brother David'. What greater tribute could be paid him than that!

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