

## The Forgotten Brainerd: John— Missionary to the North American Indians, 1747-1781

David Brainerd's life and legacy have become a special part of Christian history for Christians worldwide. The sacrificial giving of himself to take the gospel to the North American Indians, as recorded in his journals and Jonathan Edward's *Life of David Brainerd*, has been used of God to stir missionary zeal and action among succeeding generations of believers, both in the U. S. and worldwide. But one quickly forgets that David Brainerd's entire ministry lasted only three years before his death at the age of twenty-nine. He is so well-remembered and rightly so, as his pioneering mission work became a catalyst for missions and gospel zeal in the future.

So one wonders how is it that so little is known and remembered about his brother, John, in light of the amazing fact that John replaced David as the appointed missionary and pastor among the Indians shortly before David's death at age 29, and would remain there for the next 34 years. So John's ministry exceeded David's by over 30 years among the Indians, exhibiting the same kind of sacrifice, loneliness, commitment, and zeal that the older and more well-known Brainerd had shown. How can we not remember John Brainerd as well?

The Brainerd brothers were born to Mr. and Mrs. Hezekiah Brainerd, a family with a godly heritage and strong Puritan convictions. Nine children were born to Hezekiah and his wife: Hezekiah, Jr. (1708), Dorothy (1710), Nehemiah (1712), Jerusha (1714), Martha (1716), David (1718), John (1720), Elizabeth (1722), and Israel (1725). So John was the 7th child born into an already large family on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1720, in Haddam, Connecticut.

The family's stability was to be cut short within a few years, as their mother died when John was seven, then five years later, father Hezekiah died. As David was fourteen and John twelve at that time, their care and education were left with their older five siblings, several of which by this time were married. Several of the Brainerds then also died at an early age as well: Jerusha as a married woman around her 19th year and Israel, the youngest of them all, who had already begun to walk in the godliness he had seen in his parents and older siblings. He was at Yale College himself when he was called to visit his dying brother, David. He had stirrings toward the Christian ministry himself, but never had the opportunity, as he died at the age of twenty-three, Jonathan Edwards calling him 'an ingenious, serious, studious, and pious person.'

David and John would have experienced the typical New England upbringing. Thomas Brainerd, John's biographer, pictures it:

At a young age, from sundown on Saturday evening until Sunday evening, the young man's sports would be suspended, all secular reading laid aside, and the Bible, the *New England Primer*, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and books like Baxter's *Saints Everlasting Rest* would have been read; they were taught by their father that it was a sin to find fault with the family meals, their clothing, tasks, or their lot in life. If one of the young men would have complained at meal times, they would hear, "You don't like your mother's provision? You may leave the table!"

David and John lived with their married siblings the next few years until their specific departures for Yale, with David arriving there as a freshman two years before John would come. John entered Yale in 1742 as a freshman with David in his junior year. This was the year that David was somewhat unjustly expelled from the school. David, though not without fault in the situation, was made the target of overly-severe administrative discipline from the school officials over a critical comment of a professor he had made in private conversation that was overheard by a

student, which was then repeated by a woman in the town to a school official. The entire event was blown out of proportion, especially in light of David's full confession of guilt and a private apology. When the school officials demanded a public apology for the private infraction, David felt it too severe and would not submit to that. Those in authority would not lessen their position and thus David was expelled in his junior year, never to be allowed to return. John Wesley himself was later to make the comment regarding those who carried out the severe actions: "Are these people even Christians at all?"

This grievous event not only greatly affected the Brainerd's family, but would have caused deep sadness and embarrassment for young John, yet in his first year at Yale. He had to remain there without his older brother's presence and guidance, which he did, graduating in 1746 at the age of twenty-six. Still, God's providence was overruling man's sinful limitations to bring about great good for Christ's kingdom in the near future that would affect many in coming generations. There is ample evidence that David and John were very close and were in genuine fellowship in the things of God. Two letters particularly reveal the nature of their relationship. The first was written in April, 1743 from David to John:

*I should tell you that I long to see you, but my own experience has taught me that there is no happiness and satisfaction to be enjoyed in earthly friends or any other enjoyment that is not God Himself. Therefore, if the God of all grace is pleased graciously to afford each of us His presence and grace, that we may perform the work He calls us to do until we arrive at our journey's end, then the local distance at which we are held from one another at present is of no great importance to either of us. Alas! The presence of God is what I want and need. For my part, I feel the most vile of any creature living. All you can do for me is pray incessantly that God would make me humble, holy, resigned, and heavenly-minded by my trials. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Let us run, wrestle and fight, that we may win the prize and obtain that complete happiness of being holy, as God is holy. So wishing and praying that you may advance in learning and grace, and be made fit for special service for God— I remain,*

*Your affectionate brother.*

Part of another letter to John, December 27, 1743:

*Why should we sink and grow discouraged with any particular trials which we encounter in this world? Death and eternity are before us— a few more tossing billows will waft us into the world of spirits and we hope into endless pleasures and uninterrupted rest and peace. Let us, then, run with patience the race set before us. O, that we could depend more on the living God and less upon our own wisdom and strength. My dear brother, may the God of all grace comfort your heart and make you an instrument of good to His people in your day. This is the constant prayer of your affectionate brother.*

## INDIAN MISSIONS

Even from Plymouth Rock in 1620, ministry to North American Indians was an issue for pursuit by evangelical Christians, both in America and Great Britain. In the 1640's, Thomas Mayhew began to preach among Indians groups on the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket in New York. The Mayhew descendants kept this ministry continuing for five generations until the death of Zechariah Mayhew in 1813.

It was in 1646 that John Eliot began a settlement for Indians at Newton, Massachusetts. Then fifteen years later, Eliot planted a church at the village of Natick. He also translated the Bible and other books into at least one Indian language, with 1500 copies of his Bible translation being published in 1663 and 2000 more in 1685. Eliot lived until his 80<sup>th</sup> year, dying in 1690, being called the ‘Apostle to the Indians’.

By the 1670’s, in and around the Plymouth colony, there were 24 different churches for Indians, who were taught, not only the gospel, but also farming, sewing, and knitting. As late as the 1860’s, in the western part of Martha’s Vineyard, there was at least four thousands acres of Indian property, with the state of Massachusetts furnishing their churches and schools.

Such early and successful labors among the North American natives brought about the formation of various Christian organizations known as societies, which would continue such good work. One such society was formed in Edinburgh, Scotland, called ‘The Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge’. Known as the S. P. C. K., it was this organization that sent John Sergeant in 1733 from Yale College to go to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, then called ‘a howling wilderness’, where he labored for fifteen years until his death in 1749.

When Sergeant arrived in Stockbridge, he found fifty Indians who apparently had little or no cooperation with white men. Upon his death fifteen years later, there were no less than 218 Indians in the village, with good dwellings, developed farms, a church of forty-two members, and a school with one hundred students. It was to Stockbridge that Jonathan Edwards would go after Sergeant’s death, when Edwards was dismissed as pastor from his church in Northampton.

It was this same Scottish S. P. C. K. that commissioned David Brainerd to begin a mission among the Indians at Nassau Township, New York, in 1743. Thus began the brief and legendary work of the famous older Brainerd brother. In light of the great work that God did among the Indians under David’s preaching, it is an easily-forgotten fact that his entire ministry lasted only three years. But in those three years of lonely and difficult gospel labor, David Brainerd sowed in tears and reaped in joy, seeing one of the purest outpourings of the Holy Spirit possibly since the Day of Pentecost. Thomas Brainerd later would give one of the finest descriptions ever penned about the work of grace which occurred under David’s ministry:

*The frequent revivals, marked by cries of anxiety, tears of contrition, earnestness of prayer, fullness of transformation evidenced in subsequent holiness, have encouraged the whole church of God for the past one hundred years.*

David Brainerd had health battles even in his mid-twenties, and by the summer of 1746, he began to realize that he might not be long for this world. His battle was with what would later be diagnosed as tuberculosis. Soon his thoughts began to turn toward the possibility of John being the one to succeed him among the Indians as missionary pastor. The next year, David still with strength enough to make some trips, made his way in April of 1747, to Newark, N. J., where the presbytery of New York was meeting for annual business. He spent part of April 9 in the Presbyterian session meetings, then went in the afternoon to Elizabethtown to see John. It is clear what occurred over the next 2-3 days between the two brothers, as David recorded a brief and simple entry in his diary:

*April 10—found my brother John there and spent time in conversation with him. April 11—assisted in examining my brother for [ministerial] licensure by the New York Presbytery; April 14—this day my brother went to my people.*

John was ordained later by the same presbytery early in 1748.

Thomas Brainerd, John's biographer, gives some insight as to how to view this brief entry in David's diary:

*We doubt whether an interview stirring such thoughts and involving such heart yearnings, ever had a record more brief. Its brevity is suggestive. To these two brothers, duty was everything and their own lives personally were nothing. They met as soldiers on the battlefield. One [David] who had fought in the front rank bravely was now fallen wounded and would return home to die. The other [John], still fresh, strong and hopeful, stood ready to take his dying brother's sword and fight in the same conflict, as God should ordain.*

What words and prayers that would have been shared between them in those five brief days together would have been very moving to hear. Both of them realized that once John rode off to the Indians, it could likely be the last time they would ever see each other upon earth.

David had written John a final letter:

*Dear brother, I am now just on the verge of eternity, expecting very speedily to appear in the unseen world. I feel myself no more an inhabitant of earth, and sometimes earnestly long to depart and be with Christ. I bless God that He has for some years given me an abiding conviction that it is impossible for any rational creature to enjoy true happiness without being entirely devoted to Him. Under the influence of this conviction, I have in some measure acted and lived. O, that I had done so more! I saw both the excellency and necessity of holiness of life, but never in such a manner as now, when I am just brought to the sides of the grave. . . . yet, blessed be God, I find I have really had, for the most part, such a concern for His glory and the advancement of His kingdom in the world, that it is a satisfaction to me to reflect upon these years. And now, my dear brother, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace . . . . may you enjoy the Divine Presence both in private and in public and may the arms of your hands be made strong by the right hand of the mighty God of Jacob. These are the passionate desires and prayers of Your affectionate and dying brother— David Brainerd*

John was now journeying alone on horseback toward Albany County, N. Y. He was twenty-seven years old, had no prior experience as a missionary or as a pastor, and was ignorant of the Indian language. An unlikely candidate for the difficult work ahead of him, according to human judgment. But God's ways are not man's ways. God was sending the young Brainerd to continue the heavenly work his brother had begun. Surely he would still have many questions for David and David would likely have had many more things to tell John about ministry to the Indians than time had allowed.

At least a day's ride to Kaunawmeek, in Albany County, N. Y., brought John to the small cabin which David had built with the help of the Indians. In light of who he was, the Indians gave John a warm and joyful welcome, as his biographer says, "with open arms." They would have met John the previous May, when he had visited David, and now they welcomed him as their new spiritual under-shepherd.

Though the welcome was real, for John the reality of leaving all his friends, the intellectual setting of Yale and New England, and all the civilized benefits he had ever known, to arrive at a

wilderness cabin with only Indians around him, must have prompted all the faith and courage he had. It must be remembered that it had only been twenty-four months since David had found the Indians very wild, roaming around, reckless and behaving like savages in drunkenness and evil. But they had been transformed by a power not of this world in a genuine outpouring of the Spirit of God, and were now humble, teachable, and earnest Christians. They had for the previous two years been receiving serious and solid preaching, and their progress in Christian growth proved to be genuine and consistent. A Mr. McKnight, a minister in New York, reported of the Indian converts: "They put to shame their white brethren in other churches."

It was this group that John had come by himself to live among. But he did not know the language at all and was yet inexperienced in knowing all their ways of thinking. David's recently-published journal, which John would have just obtained, reveals the difficult circumstances John would have to face:

*I have often been obliged to preach in their houses in cold and windy weather, full of smoke, as well as being unspeakably filthy, which has thrown me many times in violent headaches . . . while I have been preaching, their children cry to such a degree that I could scarcely be heard and their mothers would take no care to quieten them; at the same time, some men would be laughing during the sermon or mocking divine truths, with others playing with their dogs, all this, not out of spite or prejudice, but for lack of better manners.*

John began his labors on or near April 15, 1747 and except for brief occasional visits, never returned to New England. Bethel was the name given a new settlement which John took part in helping found. This was the location from which John dated his correspondence, being often called by Jonathan Edwards, "the Indian town in New Jersey." John's first communication about the place was insightful and revealing in writing about what he first saw of the work of God through David's ministry:

*It pleased the Lord greatly to smile on my brother's endeavors, and in the most remarkable manner to open the eyes of the poor natives and to turn them from Satan to God. The Indians had settled themselves on a tract of land near Cranberry, far better than Crossweeksung, for cultivation and for such a number as were now gathered together. In this situation I found the Indians when I arrived among them at their new settlement, called Bethel, about the middle of April. This summer I have officiated for my brother, who took a journey eastward, thinking it might possibly be a means of recovering his health. But his disease [consumption] has taken such a hold on his vitals as not to be removed by medicine.*

By the time John arrived, the revival which had occurred within the previous year had begun to decrease. But he found it, to use his words, "only gradually going off." This testimony actually proves the original purity and power of the work of the Holy Spirit from two years earlier. The Indians were now living out their Christian lives which had begun with their clear conversion during a time of God-sent revival. Now, two years later, John could say that "the work of divine grace still went on among the Indians."

Of his first labors from April until September, few details are available. He seems to have entered into the work in the same pattern and heart which David had exhibited. But the major event of this period was in July, when John, receiving news of his brother's increased sickness, left Bethel for Jonathan and Sarah Edwards's home in Northampton, Massachusetts, where David was staying. John had not sent word to David that he was coming, though David had expressed to the

Edwards's family of his desire to see his brother. It must have been a real joy for them both when John arrived. Jonathan Edwards wrote of this particular visit:

*Mr. David Brainerd was much refreshed by this visit, for his brother was peculiarly dear to him; he seemed to rejoice in a devout and solemn manner to see him and to hear the comfortable things he brought concerning the state of his dear congregation of Christian Indians. John also brought some of his private writings, particularly his diary, which he had kept for several years past.*

This diary was David's own personal copy, which gave him genuine joy to read while at the Edwards's home. In a real sense, he was able to live his memories over again, and, as Thomas Brainerd says, "comforted the weakness of his dying hours by the recollection of honest and earnest labor in the past."

John stayed a week and returned to his work, but by October, he had a strong desire to see David again and made another Northampton trip, arriving October 7, shortly before David died. David Brainerd's earthly life was virtually gone, as he died a few days later on October 19th. After the funeral and several days more, John headed once again to Bethel to his Indian flock. Before now, there had been some hope for David's restoration in many hearts, as he was only twenty nine years old. But now John would be the permanent pastor among David's beloved Indians. What he must have felt in that return journey, God only knows. But God was with him and that would prove to be sufficient.

In February, 1748, John Brainerd was finally ordained to the gospel ministry. It wasn't long before two of his Yale friends and classmates, Elihu Spencer of Haddam, Connecticut, the Brainerds' home town, and Job Strong of Northampton, came to join John in the work at Bethel and among the six Indian nations in western New York, which included the Mohawk, Oneidas, Cayugas, Senecas, Tuscaras, and the Onondayas. The arrival of these two friends had to be a deep encouragement and help to John, as the three would have initially lived together and would have had regular times of fellowship, prayer, and discussion.

Five months after David's death, Jonathan Edwards wrote a letter to Mr. James Robe in Scotland, regarding the Brainerds' work among the Indians:

*We have had accounts from time to time of religion being in a flourishing state in the Indian congregation of New Jersey, under the care of Mr. John Brainerd; of the congregation's increasing by the access of Indians from distant places; of a work of awakening being carried on among the unconverted, and of additions made to the number of the hopefully converted. Mr. Brainerd was at my house a little while ago, and represented this to be the present state of things in that congregation.*

By the time John had been at his work there two years in 1749, he had begun to prove, by God's grace, the certainty and reality of his calling, as he went about his work with what his biographer calls "eminent success." As his older brother was a difficult if not impossible man to equal, John at least showed himself to be equal in fidelity and faithfulness.

One later biographer records:

*Mr. John Brainerd traveled to the Forks of Delaware and to Wyoming several times, to induce the Indians to leave their unsettled life and dwell near him. Numbers came, from time to time, but he succeeded in doing little more than civilizing them. In 1751 he had*

*some special success, and in October, 1752, he had forty families near him, and thirty-seven communicants. There were fifty children in the school. In the same year, with only one attendant, he spent a fortnight on the Susquehanna. Their horses were stolen, the guide was too lame to go on foot, and they remained three days where there was no house. That year, also, the General Court of Connecticut, on the petition of the Correspondents, granted a brief for a general collection to aid him in his school.*

In 1752, John married a young woman by the name of Experience Lyons from New Haven, Connecticut. Nothing is recorded of her background or her coming with John to Bethel, but it is evident from the record that theirs was a happy marriage.

In 1755 Brainerd felt he should cease his work with the Society as a missionary, and in 1757 left to become the pastor of the evangelical congregation in Newark, N. J. But he remained only a few years, as in 1750, he resumed his work among the Indians.

*"As to the success that has attended my labors," he wrote, "I can say but little. It is a time wherein the influences of the Diving Spirit are mournfully withheld. 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."*

When John reached his forty-ninth year, David had been dead twenty-two years. John was himself now facing increasing health problems and was going out less and less on extended mission travels among the Indians. Instead, he had begun to establish preaching points among scattered white people. Still, beginning from 1760, over the next ten years Brainerd preached over 500 sermons outside his own area in his travels.

In the latter half of his life, John preached the gospel with zeal and self-denial over a vast neglected area of New Jersey among white people. The astounding fact is that he established at least seven white churches in addition to his full-time labors among the Indian tribes. Seven other places were regularly and frequently visited by him.

In 1777, he removed to Deerfield, and preached there till his death on March 18th, 1781. At the age of thirty-four, he had been elected a trustee of the College of Princeton and served faithfully in this capacity for twenty-six years until the end of his life. In his final years, he was zealous, faithful, and unceasing in his preaching of the gospel of God's grace. He battled through personal discouragements, some spiritual depression, and regular physical infirmities, but remained faithful to the end. He gave himself to the Indians for the sake of the gospel for over thirty years.

John Brainerd would have died among the Indians he loved, had not war broken out and a British army captured the area, causing him to be removed from there. He finally ended up in Deerfield, Connecticut, preaching there until his death on March 18th, 1781, though he was never officially installed as their pastor. But the people's love for him caused him to be buried under the church there, with a marble slab bearing the words: "Beneath here moldereth the dust of the Rev. John Brainerd— died March, 1781." It was March 18<sup>th</sup>. He was sixty-one years old. His will began with these words:

*I, John Brainerd, minister of the gospel of Christ, at present laboring under some bodily indisposition, but through the grace of God, blest with the fullest use of reason, think it my indispensable duty to Christ and my family, to signify my will in writing. First of all, I*

*give and recommend my soul into the hands of God in and through Jesus Christ, firmly relying on His name, merits and righteousness for pardon, justification, and eternal life.*

It is not surprising that different sources would later compare the Brainerd brothers. A pastor, Dr. Field, who was for many years minister of the congregation in which the Brainerd's parents resided, was to say of John, "The tradition in Haddam is that he was as pious a man as his brother David, but not equal to him in ability." There is no evidence that the Indian believers made any comparison between the two men. Certainly in both, by the working of divine grace, there was biblical orthodoxy, humility, spiritual passion, self-denial, and prayerfulness.

The heritage David and John left did not end with their deaths. In the history of Haddam, Connecticut, their birthplace and first home, since its first settlement, the following Brainerds were ministers which came out of Haddam: David, John, Elijah, Eleazar, Chilliab, Nehemiah, Israel, Israel II, James, and David S. Brainerd. (quoted in the *Contributions to Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut*, New Haven: 1861)

Thomas Brainerd gives the best commendation about John that a man could receive: "He was a lover of all good men and seems to have hated nothing but sin; he was a holy man of God, to which his whole life bore witness."

Two brothers— John and David. Of whom the world was not worthy. May God raise up such brothers once again in our day, who live not for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again to give life to the peoples of all nations.

– Mack Tomlinson