



WATTS CHAPEL: Small Group Saturday

Black History Series: “AFRICAN AMERICAN STORIES OF UNSHAKABLE FAITH” Author: Carey Latimore

Date: January 21 – February 25, 2023

9:00 – 10:00 am - (Login to Small Group at this link)

[Upcoming Events – Watts Chapel Missionary Baptist Church](#)

<u>Lesson</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Bible Reading</u>
1	January 21	Philemon 1
2	January 28	Matthew 7: 24-25
3	February 4	Genesis 1: 1-3
4	February 11	Jeremiah 29:13
5	February 18	Isaiah 43:1-2
6	February 25	Philippians 3:13-14

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Lesson 1: Philemon 1 - Finding Freedom in Christ

Date: January 21, 2023

Facilitator: Rev. Edmonds



In the first chapter of *Unshakable Faith*, Dr. Carey Latimore delivers three stories of great faith during periods of slavery and injustice. In these stories he helps us understand the lives of persons who showed remarkable unshakable faith in spite of their circumstances. The first story was about Onesimus, a slave owned by Philemon a church leader. The second and third stories tell us about Cyrus Bustill and Phillis Wheatley who lived in colonial America. The lives of these three people reveal a legacy of faith that overcame slavery, oppression and bitter times as they learned to forgive. The author hopes that we will be challenged by these stories of faith to overcome our own present circumstances of oppression and persecution.

Onesimus: While Paul was in prison he met a slave named Onesimus who had escaped from his master Philemon, a friend of Paul. Philemon a slave owner was also an outstanding member of the church at Colossae. Although Paul, a Roman citizen, was in prison also, he still had more rights than a slave like Onesimus. During their time in prison Paul ministered to Onesimus through scripture, prayer, and bringing him to faith in Christ Jesus. Paul was able to look beyond the worldly designations of race, class and cultural distinctions and see Onesimus as a fellow brother and not a slave. Later, in a letter to Philemon, Paul urges Philemon to accept Onesimus as a fellow brother in Christ. Though the prisoner, the slave and the slave master are divided by circumstances, they are united by faith in the power of the blood of Jesus. Although Paul never fully challenged the legal issue of slavery, he does ask Philemon to set Onesimus free.

Paul goes on to become the most prolific writer and evangelist in the New Testament. According to church tradition, Philemon became a church leader and died a martyr for his belief in Jesus. Before he died, he set Onesimus free who went on to become a bishop of the church in Ephesus. Accordingly, Onesimus went from slave to brother to bishop.

Cyrus Bustill: The First Great Awakening, a movement of the Holy Spirit, between 1730 and 1740, brought many slaves and former slaves into the church. Cyrus Bustill was among these new believers. The local established church wanted nothing to do with this Great Awakening, with people raising their hands and shouting without decorum. Religious leaders banned these new converts from their churches. They made them preach outdoors on local farms and pastures. Yet, people from every background gathered in the fields on one accord not separated by race or class but devoted to changing their lives and spreading God's word. Cyrus Bustill was trained by his master as a backer. Once he became free, Cyrus Bustill opened his own bakery and was part of the group of prominent businessmen who started the Free African Society that would lead to the creation of the first Black Episcopal Church. Bustill wanted to stop the growing division taking place between slaves and free blacks. Some free Blacks saw themselves superior to those who were slaves. Bustill condemned this attitude and encouraged them to work together. He also found the strength to overcome his anger toward those who enslaved him and even forgiving them. As we prayerfully seek to draw closer to God, we also have to find the strength to forgive, and if possible, reconcile with those who have hurt us.

Phillis Wheatley: In 1761 a young woman arrived in Boston on a slave ship named Phillis. The man who bought her was John Wheatley who named the child Phillis after the ship that brought her. Phillis learned to read and write in sixteen months after John Wheatley purchased her. Although Wheatley owned slaves, he was faithful practicing Christian. John Wheatley had initially purchased Phillis as a gift for his wife. During her time with the Wheatley's, Phillis spent her free time writing poetry. Some of her poetry would become her only published book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Even though she was a slave when the book was published, she did get her freedom later. Her poetry must have presented a sharp contradiction to her life as a slave in the Wheatley household. Phillis always placed God first in her life which helped her contextualize her being taken from her homeland and her sale to a slave master who never knew her name. There are three important things about Phillis's life: 1) Whatever obstacles she faced she interpreted them as God's plan for her salvation. 2) Even though she carried scars from her past, she believed she had gained Christ as a result. And 3) Phillis believed that all Christians are asked to sacrifice for Christ, as Christ did for us. In the last days of her life, though she was free, she fell into poverty because people would rather have a slave than hire a free Negro.

Questions Session #1:

1. How did his faith sustain and inspire Onesimus to forgive, in the midst of his circumstances to build the Kingdom of God? (Read Philemon 1)
2. What are some significant similarities and dissimilarities between slavery as practiced in the First Century, during the time of Paul, and the Atlantic Slave Trade of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries between Africa and the Americas?
3. How does faith and the powerful inspiration of the Holy Spirit, during the First Great Awakening, help believers like Cyrus Bustill overcome the difficulty and hardships of slavery?
4. How can we as believers find the strength like Cyrus Bustill to forgive others and if possible, reconcile with those who have hurt and mistreated us?
5. How did Phillis Wheatley get her name and what do you think about how she was named?
6. How did faith inspire the spiritual journey of Phillis Wheatley, in spite of tremendous economic, physical, and psychological challenges she faced?
7. What do these three stories have in common regarding the Christian contradiction, Christian faith, and Christian power to forgive?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Lesson 2: Matthew 7: 24-25- Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution

Date: January 28, 2023

Facilitator: Michael Calhoun

SCRIPTURE: *“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wiser man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.” Matthew 7: 24 – 25*

This Chapter finds the African American community emerging after the Revolutionary War. They were being confronted with the reality that the victory of the American Colonies over Great Britain in the war for independence didn't change their reality. Slavery as an institution was still in full effect. The hope for many African American Christians had that American independence would lead to an end to slavery was crushed.

The truth was clear that race relationships in America even outside of slavery were not going to change. African American experience in the world at large but also within the walls of the church was second class. The early part of the 19th century saw many Black Christians become disillusioned that answers would be found in the white church structure. We see more and more the development of independent churches. These churches develop in the northern cities like Philadelphia, Baltimore, Brooklyn NY. We also see this happen in Southern Cities like Richmond, and Savannah. This would lead to the formation of an independent denomination AME church under the direction Richard Allen.

Black Christian leadership had to focus on not only the spiritual reality of black folks, but also the social needs of their community. In 1787 Richard Allen and Absalom Jones ministers in Philadelphia establish the Free Africa Society. This organization provided mutual aid to help support widows and orphans, as well as the sick or unemployed. They supported the education of children or arranged apprenticeships if the children could not attend one of the free schools that were developed.

During this period, we also see the active expression of slave rebellions. Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner. These rebellions are rooted in the religious faith of its leaders and belief that God wants something more on this side of Jordan for Black folks.

At the same time, we see a continued growth in the conversion of African American to Christian faith. America is experiencing a second great awakening movement. This movement like the first is marked by increase of African Americans joining especially the Baptist and Methodist church traditions. Some of the reasons that were important were the fervent services, marked by passionate singing and preaching.

Another factor was unlike Catholics, Presbyterian, Episcopal traditions which required a long process of Christian instruction Catechism before active membership. In the Baptist and Methodist tradition, you could come forward give your life to God on Tuesday night and join the choir on Wednesday night. In these traditions, you could become a part of the worship experience while you were receiving education. The style of worship was more attractive than the less ecstatic expression Episcopalian, Catholic traditions. The important thing to keep in mind is that just like today people need to have a point of connection were the faith is relevant to their needs.

Another expression that starts to manifest itself is a understanding that African American's will never find home here in America. Even though this is a small part of the population we see the start of colonization societies These groups looked to go home to Africa, they would take the gospel and resettle in places like Liberia. Paul Cuffee was an early African American Businessman, supported the move back to Africa. It would allow for autonomy for African American people and also to minister their Christian faith on the continent. In America an organization started called the American Colonization Society. This movement goal was to aid in the relocation of African Americans back to Africa. On one hand it is believed that for some people involved with this organization their main goal was to convince free black people to leave the country. Another criticism was the organization had little concern about enslaved Africans. For some people in the Black Community the ACS was seen as a way to escape racism and advance the gospel in Africa. In truth, it was probably a combination of all these things.

So we have all these movements and expressions dealing with the reality of how do we further the kingdom of God? But also the question of how to best serve the needs of free and enslaved Africans?

What I want to focus on at this point are 2 people's lives that the author lifted up the first is Lott Cary. Lott Cary was born in Virginia around 1780 near Richmond. He was born into slavery his slave master hired him out to a tobacco warehouse in Richmond. Lott worked hard and soon became a manager at the warehouse. Through that position he was able to earn money enough to purchase his freedom. He did this in part by gathering the waste tobacco repackaging it. So his keen business sense and seeing an opportunity led to his freedom.

Working in Richmond led to other opportunities for Lott Cary. He began to attend First Baptist Church. It was here in this racially mixed Church Cary dedicated his life to Christ. Soon after he became a minister and was holding separate worship services for the Black members. At the time first Baptist had over 800 black members.

In 1816 Cary worked with a white businessman William Crane to establish the Richmond African Baptist missionary Society. They planned ways to spread Christian faith through Africa, as well as help African Americans here in America. These two men prayed together and worked to establish a school for Blacks in Richmond.

Cary saw African missions as important in that it would opportunity for more freedom for African Americans. Cary in a short while from working at the warehouse he had bought his freedom, and the freedom of his two children. When he told his boss at the warehouse of his plans to leave. He offered him the equivalent of 45 thousand dollars a year to stay. But Lott Cary as he told his friend William Crane "I feel bound to labor for my suffering race."

Lott Cary speaking from the pulpit of First Baptist addressed his African American congregation. And expressed to them that he would probably not see their faces again he was going to Africa to establish a colony in Liberia and spread the gospel. So in 1821 only 8 years after obtaining his freedom, Cary steps down as pastor of First Baptist's Black congregation and sets sail for Liberia.

Once he arrived in Africa, he was confronted with new obstacles he had to purchase land, worry about slave traders. He was forced to erect fort like fortifications. Imagine the reality of going back to Africa to only being enslaved and shipped back to the America's. So before any missions could take place he had to help safeguard their safety.

Cary saw his situation similar to Nehemiah in the bible as he returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon. He wrote his friend, Crane, quoting Neh 4:17: "the Jews, who are rebuilding the city, grasped a weapon in one hand, while they labored with the other." This is the world that Lott Cary found himself in Missionary, Minister, military leader.

In 1826 he becomes the governor of the colony. At this time, they have setup Sunday School, and a day school that the local people could attend. They were still under the constant fear and pressure from slave traders. Later that year while defending the mission against slave traders, Cary died from an explosion while making ammunition.

The author points out what an example Cary's life becomes. He wasn't disillusioned by his life as a slave, or a freedman limited by racism. He found inspiration in the Bible and continued pressing forward. At his death the mission had 100 baptized converts, and he died protecting people from being enslaved.

The next person's life we want to examine is Maria Stewart. Maria was born in Connecticut in 1803. Her early life was difficult She was orphaned by age 5. Worked as a domestic servant from age 15. She married a free black man James Stewart at age 19. Her husband was a sailor, a veteran of the war of 1812, and a successful businessman.

During this period of her life, she became part of the elite African American families of Boston. James Stewart died in 1829, leaves her a large estate. Unfortunately, she was defrauded by the white executors of his estate. This left her without anything and forced her back into domestic work. Maria points out the loss of her husband and her good friend abolitionist David Walker lead to a major change in her life. Although she had seen herself as a woman of faith. Her faith went on a different level in 1830, she had a born-again experience. She made a public confession of her faith.

This set a new direction in her life she spoke out on the social conditions that plagued her community. She dedicated her life to helping others. She became an advocate for the Abolishment of slavery. She felt that she had nothing to fear after losing everything. And was assured that God had called her to this ministry. With unshakable faith and a desire to carry on the work of her late friend David Walker. Maria became a writer and speaker in the fight to end slavery.

Maria worked with the leading Abolitionist of the day William Lloyd Garrison. And over the next few years spoke to audiences of both White and Black people. Maria Stewart took a stand on many things. In many ways she was ahead of her time. As I have stated, Maria was an outspoken opponent of slavery. She had a strong stance on personal morality.

She challenged Black people to use their power of free will. She knew that we had great difficulties but believed that God would always provide a way. She realized her race and gender may have limited her opportunities. In Maria Stewards mind that wasn't an excuse. We have God on our side.

Maria saw the intersection of her being black person and a black woman. She would encourage Black men to be more involved in the struggle for freedom. She did not see a world where women should be subservient to men. Maria encouraged that Black men and women should work together She wanted equality. Mara Steward was a head of her time in her life she was a teacher, founded Sunday Schools, abolitionist, matron of what is now Howard University hospital in Washington D.C.

Maria believed that God gave women gifts and power. Women she felt should exert their power in order to fulfill their destinies. She felt God worked through Women and gave them the power to overcome. Maria Steward fought for Justice but that was rooted in seeking out the Lord first.

For both Lott Cary & Maria Steward their faith didn't stop at the church doors but compelled them into service to others.

Here are a few questions to reflect on from our study. Be prepared to add a comment to our class discussion.

- 1.What does it mean for us that God took Cary from a slave to manager and eventually to governor of an African colony?**
- 2. Maria Steward saw a place for men and women as co-equals. How successful are our churches in hearing her call some two hundred years later?**
- 3.Maria Steward believed that we should encourage each other. How are we doing this, and how can we do better?**