

**James Baker (1805-1839)**

**Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine**

MEMOIR OF JAMES BAKER  
PRIMITIVE METHODIST TRAVELLING PREACHER  
BY SAMUEL WEST

James Baker was born March 12, 1805, at Hodson, in the parish of Chiseldon, in Wiltshire. His father was a Wesleyan local preacher, and his mother was a member; both are now living; and their son was trained up by them, and in the Sunday school. But when he grew up, he joined wicked companions, became a champion or leader in back-sword, wrestling, fighting, and such like wicked exercises. But in his life of folly, he had much ado to stifle conscience.

His conversion took place in the year 1827; joined the Wesleyan society, visited and prayed with the sick, exhorted at prayer meetings, and laboured to bring souls to God, and several of his sinful companions were brought to seek religion.

In the year 1828, his business bringing him much into the company of worldly people, he grew slack, became a backslider, and for about three months walked in darkness.

About this time the Primitive Methodists opened Badbury and Chiseldon, and Brother Baker hearing Mr. Thomas Tuck, local preacher, was much affected; and at a prayer meeting at Hodson, the week following, he cried aloud for mercy, and fainted away. The congregation was much affected; and the more so when recovering he gave out,

“Alas! alas! where shall I go?  
Jesus from me is gone!  
A child of sorrow, grief, and woe,  
For evermore undone !

“My hope is fled, and faith I’ve none;  
God’s word I cannot bear;  
My sense and reason almost gone,  
Fill’d with tormenting fear.

“What next to do, I cannot tell,  
So keen my sorrows are ;  
Without relief I sink to hell,  
To howl in long despair.”

He did not then obtain liberty, but at a prayer meeting soon after, the Lord restored him to the joy of his salvation. He joined our society at Chiseldon, in Brinkworth circuit, and became the class-leader and a local preacher. Of his call to the ministry, he says,

“About two years after my conversion to God, I felt my mind deeply concerned about the immortal souls of my neighbours, believing there was a greater work for me to do; yet I trembled at the very thought of preaching; but still I could not rest. So I prayed about it; and one day, about two o’clock, as I was praying, the Almighty showed me that I must preach the gospel to my fellow sinners. I told the Lord, if I lived till night I would begin; and if he made me useful in the conversion of sinners, whatever my persecution and trials might be, by his help, I would continue. And the first time I spoke, several of my old companions were awakened; and though I am sorry to say my labours have been so little owned of God, yet I am thankful to say it has not been all in vain. I hope there are some converted under my ministry that I know not of; but the small number I have taken the account of, is only two hundred and twenty-four, in the long space of seven years. So this is all that I can say about my call to the ministry.”

At the Conference of the year 1836, he was taken on the annual list, and the foregoing extract contains the substance of what was then given in, as a proof of his call to the ministry.

In the year 1831, being stationed in Brinkworth circuit, I became acquainted with James Baker, and found him a willing, zealous, acceptable, and useful local preacher, and the leader of the class at Chiseldon. At that time, a part of what now forms the Shefford circuit, was a mission, and his labours there were occasionally very severe. He frequently travelled from twenty to thirty miles on the Lord’s-day, and preached three sermons in the open-air, mostly to outrageous mobs of persecutors, some of whom had formerly been his antagonists on the stage. On this part especially, his labours as a local preacher were valuable; and also his house was very frequently the place where the servants of the Most High God tarried for the night, and refreshed themselves after the labours of the day; and it was a home for the preachers till he left. “Verily there is a reward for the righteous.”

In the year 1831, the Berkshire branch was made into Shefford circuit; and in the year 1832, Brinkworth circuit opened another mission, and our deceased friend, and Brother Samuel Turner, were the missionaries, and they opened the greater part of what now forms Chippenham circuit. He commenced his itinerant labours April 22, 1832; and the following extracts from his journal give some account of his labours, sufferings, and success in winning souls to God; and also shows what constrained him to engage in the self-denying and arduous duties of a Primitive Methodist missionary.

“I travelled two months in the home part of Brinkworth circuit, saw a few souls converted, and had many happy times with the people. At the June quarterly meeting, I was appointed as a missionary, and July 7, 1832, (Saturday evening,) I arrived at Castlecoomb, in Wiltshire, and spoke in the market-place to a large company of people. A man came to me with a cup of beer, but the Lord touched his heart that night, and he, some time afterwards, became a member of our society. At another time, as I was preaching in this town, a great number of stones and rotten eggs passed by my head in rapid confusion; and a man tried to ride his horse over me, but did not accomplish his design: however, he had like to have killed a child belonging to the person who lent him the horse.

“The next place I spoke at on this mission, was Chippenham. Here I met with great opposition from the lawyer, the constable, an inn-keeper, and the devil. But the Lord opened the way, and we soon formed a society, and in a short time we had forty members, the greatest number of them converted

to God. The next place was a neat little town, six miles from Chippenham. Here we had but little opposition, and we soon raised a society of twenty members; and the converting power lived amongst the people.

“Another place was Marshfield, ten miles from Chippenham. Here we had to contend with much opposition, and it was a long time before we saw much good done; but one night the Lord poured out the Holy Spirit upon us, and there was a cry for mercy; and that time I joined fourteen members, making then twenty-six in society. O Lord, save them all.

“Heddington. - The first time I spoke here, a man was convinced of sin; he soon after got converted at a lovefeast, and is since become a local preacher.

“Stockly. - Here the Lord owned my labours, and saved many souls. Yes, even drunkards. So that a man who sold beer, gave up his license for the want of customers.

“Devizes, a large market town ten miles from Chippenham. After I had sung a hymn, the constable came and said, ‘You must not sing here.’ I told him I’d just done, and was going to pray; but when I rose from my knees he was gone. So I preached to a large congregation, and one sinner was convinced. At another time I spoke here, and another sinner was awakened; and I this night supped with the church minister. On another occasion, it being late in the evening before I had done preaching, a wicked man hit me in the face with a turnip; also the persecutors threw stones and rockets amongst the people. But good was done. Praise the Lord.

“Laycock.- Here I have preached to hundreds of people, and not in vain. Derry Hill. - This was a little dark village, but here the Lord owned our labours. One night my wife preached to them, and formed a class. The converting work broke out, and we soon had a society of twenty members.

“I laboured on this mission about fifteen months, and saw many precious souls converted to God. October 18, 1833, came to Wootton Bassett, being stationed in the home part of the circuit.

“I continued in this part about five months, and the Lord poured out his Spirit upon the people. We frequently had eight or ten souls converted in a meeting; and the work went on till there were one hundred and ten sinners brought to the Lord. During this revival I laboured very hard. In the fore-part of the day, I visited from house to house; and at noon I invited the people to one house, and preached to them, and afterwards held a prayer meeting, and then walked five or six miles to my evening work,

“At the March quarterly meeting, 1834, I was stationed in Bristol mission, where I laboured for one quarter with but little success; yet not all in vain. I saw six souls converted to God. At the June quarter-day I left Bristol, being stationed by the Conference for the Stroudwater circuit.

“About this time we held a union Camp meeting with the Shefford circuit; at which meeting I saw numbers converted to God. It was truly delightful to see such a multitude of people worshipping God on a solitary mountain.”

James Baker was my colleague in Brinkworth circuit during his ministerial labours as a travelling preacher there; and I can, therefore, not only testify to the truth of his statements, but also confidently assert, that he was not a whit behind, if he did not exceed, any of his colleagues in diligence and success in bringing souls to God. Yes! James Baker was a hard-working and successful minister of the glorious gospel. He lived in the converting power, and the converting power lived in him, while he travelled with me in Brinkworth circuit. And thus clothed in the power of God, and determined on the consecration of himself to God, and also the concentration of all his *forces* to the great work of saving souls, he entered on his severe labour in the Stroudwater circuit. His journal states as follows:

"I arrived in Stroud, June 30, 1834, and found the circuit in a very low state, and I laboured very hard nearly twelve months before the work of the Lord broke out. There were a few converted, and but a few, till June 7, 1835, when we held a Camp meeting on Hampton common.

"It was a fine day; the meeting was well attended; the preachers had good liberty in speaking; a Divine Unction accompanied the word; and a very wicked man was powerfully awakened. At night we held a lovefeast in our preaching room at Stroud. The speaking was short, pointed, and powerful; and we had a short struggle with the powers of darkness. But we rose into faith, and the power of God descended; sinners cried aloud for mercy; and after praying with them for some time, about ten found the Lord, and others went away in distress of soul.

"The next day being Whit Monday, we held a fellowship meeting at Standley's End, and five more got converted, and others believed for sanctification. Here I received afresh baptism of the Holy Ghost.

"July 26, we held another lovefeast at Stroud. The room was crowded with people, and the power of God came down while we were singing. Cries for mercy were heard in every part of the room; and this night eight souls found Christ to be able to pardon all their sins, and fourteen joined the society.

"August 2, we held a lovefeast at Kings-Stanly. The house being too small to contain the people, numbers stood outside of the door, who wished to be with us, and who helped to sing. It was a powerful and a refreshing time. Five believed in the Lord for pardon, and three joined society.

"August 9, we held a Camp meeting on B. common. We had a large company of people, who expressed their satisfaction in a very high degree in reference to the preaching. We believe much good was done; and at night we held a lovefeast; and while one of the members of the S. End was speaking, the power of God ran through the chapel from end to side. Immediately about a hundred wicked men rushed into the chapel, and caused great confusion for about one hour, but we got them out again, and in the midst of all this, seven or eight souls got converted to God.

"August 23, we held a Camp meeting on Butt Cross, near Painswick. It was a stormy day, but we continued the meeting. The young preachers spoke well, and good was done. In the evening we held a lovefeast at Painswick, and the speaking went on well for about two hours. But then it was interrupted by the sighing and crying of distressed souls. The cries of the penitents were truly piercing. At the conclusion of the meeting, which took place about ten o'clock, we endeavoured to ascertain how many had found pardon; and we requested the people all to sit down. This being done, those who had believed in our Lord Jesus Christ for the pardon of their sins were requested to

stand up; and fourteen stood up, and confessed that they had that night found Him who is the sinner's Friend, - our glorious Redeemer. We joined eight more to the society; and from this meeting the work of God moved forward in this place. This was one of the best lovefeasts for good order that I ever attended.

"October 25, we held a lovefeast at Stroud, and one soul was converted to God; and others believed for sanctification.

"November 22, Randwick lovefeast. About six o'clock in the evening, we commenced in the usual way; and while praying the first time, a heavenly Unction descended upon the people. The young converts spoke pointedly and powerfully, and the meeting went on well for about an hour; and then the powers of darkness so strongly prevailed, that we were almost overcome. In this conflict I descended from the pulpit, and began to inquire for the penitents, and soon found one in deep distress of soul, with whom we immediately commenced praying; and, while doing this, others felt the weight of their guilt, and began to cry for mercy. And in a few minutes, there were nearly twenty in a flood of tears on their knees, crying for mercy. We had not prayed long before two or three stepped into liberty; and, being filled with the excellent glory, they broke out in loud shouts of rapturous triumph. The solid glory and converting power streamed down afresh, and was felt by the praying labourers very powerfully. Indeed I am at a loss for words to describe the scene. A little girl about twelve years of age, who was powerfully awakened to a sight of her danger, began, in the deepest agony of mind, to implore the mercy of heaven, and begged God to forgive her sins. For some time her little heart seemed ready to burst with grief; however, at length He who said, "Suffer little children to come unto me," (set her at liberty,) and she said, "I am happy," &c. I placed her on the form, and she immediately began to speak her experience. And while she was exhorting her fellow-sinners to believe in Jesus the Saviour, the power of God was again felt in an unusual manner. Some were lying speechless on the floor, overwhelmed with the power; and others, groaning in deep distress, prostrate before God. Some, melted down in godly sorrow, weeping and mourning; and others rejoicing as those who had taken great spoil, because they had found the Lord. This caused what some people call a great noise and confusion, but others call it the excellent glory. Prior to this, we had formed a circle, into which the penitents gladly hastened to be prayed for. And first one, and then another, leaped upon their feet, until about thirteen were made happy in God's pardoning love, - This was the most powerful meeting I had in this circuit. Glory be to God.

"February 7, 1836, we held another lovefeast at Randwick. The house was crowded, we rose into the Lord, the power came down, sinners cried for mercy, and seven or eight were set at liberty.

"Feb. 14, a lovefeast at Stroud; scores of people could not get into the chapel; we had a good time. Eight found the Lord.

"Feb. 28. Lovefeast at Walls Quarry; a good time: seven were converted to God; and eight joined the society. Praise the Lord, the work is moving; and the members can sing through the streets at six o'clock in the morning. While leading the class this morning at Stroud, a young woman got converted.

“April 10. Lovefeast at Painswick. Eleven converted. And at a lovefeast in Chalford chapel on the 17th inst., eleven more precious souls found the Lord. Praise the Lord. Amen. May the Lord God save them all into heaven is the prayer of J. BAKER.”

In Stroud circuit three chapels were begun. But this proved not to be judicious. The toil thereof was too heavy for Brother Baker. And there happening a great depression of trade, the whole became embarrassed; and it was thought the fatigue and difficulties injured his health.\*

His next station was in Witney circuit, where he arrived, July 6, 1837. And he commenced his labours with his usual zeal, and souls were saved, even in the midst of severe persecution. But by degrees his strength declined, but he kept up as long as he was able.

Jan. 1, 1838, he writes, “Spared to see the light of another new-year’s day, I feel thankful to the Father of all my comforts for his unspeakable mercy to me. Meanwhile, I reflect with feelings of solemnity on the past year. How many thousands of my fellow-creatures have been removed from the stage of action, and are entered upon the changeless realities of eternity! Another year, with all its distressing events, is gone; but the brittle thread of my existence is lengthened out, which fills me with new astonishment at the nameless benevolence of an infinite Deity. What is the past year but another fragment of time broken off from the short span of man’s probation, and dropt into eternity.

“Sunday, June 17, I walked to Wootton, eight miles from Witney, and was much fatigued. And after resting a short time, I preached in the open-air. I then went to Barton, rested a few minutes, and spoke again in the open-air to a very large congregation. A good time. Many respectable people were very attentive to the word spoken.

“Monday, 18. Visited about twenty families. Improved the death of a young man, whom I had visited during his illness. It was a solemn time, and many tears were shed. I hope good was done.

“19, Opened Dunstew. Sung and prayed, and soon had a large company of steady people, and I had good liberty in speaking. The clergyman stood at his window, and listened with great attention, and when we kneeled down to pray, he kneeled down also. Shook hands with the children, &c.

“21. Took tea with Mrs. Reeve of Middle Barton, and afterward, in company with a few steady pious people, went to a village called Sanford, in Oxfordshire. — We walked through the place, and announced there would be a sermon preached that night. We returned to the stocks, and commenced the service; and after speaking some time to a peaceable company of people, a magistrate and a clergyman came and broke the peace. The proceedings were as follows:

“Magistrate. — What are you doing here?

“Preacher. — (Looking another way at the little folk) — These children can answer that inquiry; but you ought to have known without asking.

“M.—If you dont go away, I shall send for the constable, and you shall go to prison for three weeks or a month.

“P.— It will not be much difference to me whether it be for three weeks or a month.

“M.— You have collected a mob.

“P.—Do you dare presume to call this steady congregation of gentlemen and ladies a mob?

"M.—You go away, or I will send for the constable. (The constable came; a very big man, about six feet high.)

"M.—You take this man into hold, constable.

"P.—Do you want me? (leaping out of the chair, and stepping across the road towards the constable;) if you do, you may have me, for I want some one to take care of me, now the magistrate and the clergyman have created a disturbance in a peaceable village. (The constable did not stir.)

"M.—Bring him before me, and I will send him to prison as a common vagabond.

"P.—You will find an uncommon one in me, I think. Please to tell me what law I have broken?

"M.—You have collected a mob — I won't call them a mob—a number of unfortunate people, who are weak-minded.

"P.—Well, you may call them unfortunate. Their misfortune is living in a village where they are in danger of being sent to prison for hearing preaching in the open-air.

"M.—They can hear the gospel every week; (appealing to the clergyman, who said, yes; the only word he spoke on this occasion.)

"P.—Jesus Christ says, 'Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature;' and what have these poor creatures done, that they must not, it seems, have it preached to them in the streets?

"M.—You go to your own home, and preach as long as you will, but not here.

"P.—Is not this a christian country?

"M.—Yes.

"P.—Then we ought to have christian officers to rule it; and this cannot be christianity to take a man up for preaching the gospel.

"M.—You know the law, and you know you have broken it.

"P.—Then you punish me for the breach of the law?

"M.—I want you to go about your business.

"P.—My business is with you, if you want me; if not, I will go and preach to the people.

"M.—(Swore, then said,) Excuse me for swearing.

"P.—There is no excuse for swearing: the scripture says, 'Swear not at all.'

"M.—I will knock that book out of your hand if you open it before me.

"P.—I don't want my book spoiled.

"M.—I cannot talk with you; you are almost an idiot.

"P.—Never mind; we can settle that matter another day.

"The magistrate went away in a rage, and I and the constable returned again to the people. I commenced preaching again, but the constable soon stopped me. He said he must take me up. I said, 'Well, I will go with you.' So I went with him to prison; but it was in his parlour, where I stayed about ten minutes. And I preached to the people in the streets through the window. I then left him, and he seemed extremely thankful that I was willing to go."

In the spring of the year 1839, our afflicted Brother was obliged to retire from the work of the ministry; but was at the Wootton Bassett district meeting, when it was evident he was going the way of all flesh. And on the Saturday, May 11, he and I went to Hodson, his native place; and Sunday, 12, I preached at Chiseldon, about a mile distant. He rode over, and for about ten minutes he addressed his weeping relations, and his old class-mates, and those with whom he had formerly worked wickedness. This was the last time we worshipped together.

His widow says, at a lovefeast, June 9, he said he was very happy, though for some time past he had felt afraid of death, yet he felt it removed, and was confident, if the Lord was about to remove him, heaven would be his home. At another time he observed, that his soul was visited with a baptism of the Holy Spirit; and he shouted and praised God, and exclaimed, "This is heaven. This will do to die with. O my Saviour, though I have been and am a great sufferer, thou hast suffered more than this for me." This was about a fortnight before his death.

Saturday, July 20, 1839, he had been unable to speak more than a word or two at a time, but on a sudden he began to sing,

"Part, part again,  
We shall never part again;  
There we shall with Jesus reign,  
And never never part again."

In a peaceful, resigned, and happy state of mind, his spirit returned to God, July 24, 1839, in the thirty-fourth year of his age. According to his desire, I improved his death at Chiseldon, Wootton Bassett, and Brinkworth.

Brother Samuel 'Turner says,

"I became acquainted with Bro. J. Baker in the year 1832; at which period we were sent as missionaries to open what is now called the Chippenham circuit. In this situation of responsibility and trial, requiring fidelity and perseverance, I had an opportunity of ascertaining what his real character was.

"The public mind, at that time, was prejudiced against us, in consequence of our missionaries before occupying that important station, and after labouring there for some time, giving it up. We therefore found a hard and barren soil to work upon. For some months we could gain access but to few families; and our studies, from necessity, during the day, were in the fields and the hedges. In these trying circumstances, such a combination of excellencies shone forth in his character as are rarely to be met with in christian ministers. Such courage, perseverance, zeal, resignation, and constant exercise of faith in the Great Atonement for the influences (outpouring) of the Holy Spirit to render his labours successful in awakening sinners, comforting of mourners, and exciting believers to press forward in the divine life.

"His whole soul was swallowed up in the great work of saving souls. His views of the perishing state of the people often so affected him, that he fell upon the ground in an agony of distress. On one occasion, before he entered the town of Marshfield, such a tide of mental misery was turned upon his spirit, that he sunk to the ground beneath the ponderous weight; and, passing by the place in company with him, soon after, he said, pointing to where he fell, "That's the spot on which I fell with the sins of Marshfield upon me." In this town several sinners were awakened under his ministry.

"Brother Baker was well instructed in the things pertaining to the kingdom of Christ. He had a very extensive knowledge of the deep things of God. He could shoot the arrows of God with such certainty of success among sinners, that I have known some instantaneously convinced of sin while under the inebriating influence of intoxicating drinks. I have laboured with but few ministers whose



labours were so owned of God amongst the outcasts of society. At times, he was awfully grand in his approaches to the Almighty, after delivering a solemn and impressive discourse in the open-air; and some of the impressed in his congregations, frequently testified that he had power with God and man. I have seen the most abandoned sinners fall to the ground as though they were dead, while he was calling upon God in mighty prayer. During the two years we laboured in the Brinkworth circuit together, more than four hundred souls were hopefully converted to God; and that God may raise up a host of such devoted men is the sincere prayer of yours, in Christ Jesus, SAMUEL TURNER."

The subject of this memo knew the real work of turning sinners to God. He was active and bold in the cause of his divine Master. He was not afraid of work, but laboured in season and out of season, and from house to house he taught and preached Jesus. He was a praying man, a minister of the Spirit, and the Lord was with him in life, and in the moment of death. During the seven years of his itinerant ministry, he preached the word of God successfully in Brinkworth, Chippenham, Bristol, Stroud, and Witney circuits. But he now rests from his labours, and his works do follow him, Yes, in his last circuit, Witney circuit, I am happy to find the fruit of his ministry in some of the most pious members and preachers amongst us, following him in the work of God, and also in their course to endless bliss. And O, may they and many more be the crown of his rejoicing at the day of judgment. Amen.

(Approved by the Witney Branch Quarterly Meeting, September 13, 1841.)

\* His health had been impaired by the vile exercise of back-swording; an exercise where two mount a stage, thrash each other with heavy sticks, and strive to lay one another's skull open; and that which first makes a breach in the other's skull is proclaimed conqueror. Now he was a champion in these savage exercises; but being a light made man, it greatly injured his body.—Ed.

---

## References

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1842/284