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## CHAPTER ONE

# *A Heritage from Holland*

John Stam's spiritual heritage began at an early age through the devotion of his parents' commitment to raising up a God-fearing family. Their desire for others to know the gospel message allowed them to have an impact on all their children, each one eventually serving in Christian ministry.

John's father, Peter Stam, was born in Holland on May 23, 1866. He grew up in the village of 't Zand, North Holland, Netherlands, and worked the family-owned tavern run by his father. Being in the family for three generations at this point, the tavern included its own theatre, store, and cafe. Because his father needed entertainers, Peter was naturally brought up in show business. For a period, he traveled throughout Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg—making people laugh, but all too often with a heavy heart. At the time, North Holland had little to no gospel literature. Peter noticed the people close to him partook in activities that only brought temporary satisfaction, including those who attended the local once-a-month church services. Peter later testified to his children that he never once heard the gospel preached in North Holland. In reality, the local state church couldn't decide or agree on what to teach. They often alternated between a Protestant minister, Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi. The topics preached ranged from politics to various books, and after the service the preacher would go to the Stam tavern to drink and shoot pool with the others. Peter wanted a change from the life he had always known. Like many European immigrants at the time, he came to America to start anew with the chance of fortune and stability.

On March 29, 1890, Peter Stam sailed first class from Holland to America aboard the *SS Spaarndam*. He was twenty-three years old and had 900 Dutch

guilders in his pocket. Originally planning to settle in Long Island, New York, Peter decided to board with a Dutch family he was in contact with in Paterson, New Jersey. He was grateful for the family's hospitality, except for one thing. They read the Bible at every evening meal and chose passages for him to read aloud. Frustrated, he eventually left the boarding house complaining that he didn't pay board money to hear that book read. To get away from the Bible and learn English faster, Peter boarded with an English-speaking family in Hackensack, New Jersey, and began to learn to read and speak English at a quicker pace. Little did Peter know what was in store for him.

While reading a magazine on a park bench the morning of July 4, 1890, Peter met a zealous woman named Margaret Neighmond, who was sitting on the other end of the bench. She happened to be a neighbor of the family Peter boarded with. Unable to understand a certain word from the magazine, Peter asked Margaret for help. Discovering he was a Hollander trying to learn English, she commented that she had a book for him. She explained, "It has two columns on each page. The left column is in Dutch; you can understand that. Then you go to the opposite column, and you'll find the same thing printed in English. It's published especially for immigrants like you. I'll be glad to give it to you if you'd like." Peter was elated, and eagerly took the book home with him.

Not long after, he realized that this was the same book he had come to loathe. Peter would often tell his children how close he came to throwing the book in the garbage. Determined by any means to learn English, however, Peter continued reading the Dutch-English New Testament. He eventually came to love the book so much, rejoicing not only in the knowledge gained but also the assurance of salvation. Peter reflected on that time:

The book told me that I was a sinner. Of course, my proud nature rebelled. It told me I was lost. I tried not to believe it; but as I read on, I had to be honest with myself, and confess that I was indeed a sinner. My life had been lived entirely to self . . .

But the Book told me that God loved me; that He "so loved the world (and that meant me) that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth

in him should not perish (that too meant me) but have everlasting life.”  
(John 3:16)

Then and there I closed with the offer. I believed the Word of God and received Christ as my own personal Savior. I surrendered my life to Him who died for me, and began by His grace to live for others, because the love of Christ constrained me.

Peter shifted through various jobs during those first couple years in America. Carpentry appealed to him, but he also worked in sales. One day when selling jewelry at homes in Paterson, he was told by an older Christian woman living on the second floor to come upstairs. Ascending the flight of stairs, Peter sold a watch to the woman for her daughter, who he quickly got to know as Amelia Williams.

Amelia Elisabeth Alletta Williams immigrated with her immediate family from Rotterdam, Holland, in October 1888. They were part French Huguenot by descent. Amelia's father had died from smallpox a decade and a half prior to them immigrating, and her mother supported the family by providing nursing services to wealthy families in the Paterson area. A friendship spontaneously developed between Peter and Amelia, and the two were married on January 7, 1892, at the home of Rev. Peter Van Vlaanderen of First Christian Reformed Church of Paterson.

One Saturday evening shortly after their first child, Peter Jr., was born, Mr. Stam was building a cradle that would serve all his children. Unexpectedly he got a visit from his carpentry employer. Peter received word from his boss that he had to present himself at work the following morning to finish a rush job. A difficult decision was presented, but Mr. Stam gracefully explained that he could not come in on Sunday, since he was a Christian, and the Lord's Day must be observed. He told his boss that he'd work until midnight that night and begin at midnight the next but would not provide labor on Sundays. "Then you are out of work," was the angry retort. Mr. Stam accepted this and acknowledged that his faith in the Lord would supply his needs.

Shortly before Peter fell asleep that night, a messenger from a former employer knocked at the front door and asked if he'd come back to work for

him—at a higher wage than before, and right away on Monday morning. Peter never forgot this experience and continually used it as a reminder for his children to trust in the Lord, not counting the cost. In May 1893, Peter's father came from Holland to see his son and his new family. Before his father returned home, he gave his son finances to help purchase land to build houses on. Through his carpentry experience and the money borrowed at interest from his father, Peter continued to gain work and became a successful builder. The flourishing business developed to include a lumberyard and insurance office. This was a great blessing to the family.

Peter and Amelia lived in two different homes their first fourteen years of marriage. The second of these homes stood at 13 N. 8th St. in Hawthorn, New Jersey. This soon became known as the corner of 8th St. and Stam's Alley, due to Peter's thriving lumber business, where he would build over a hundred homes in the area. On January 25, 1906, the growing family moved into a new fourteen-room house Peter built in the Temple Hill section of Paterson. The house at 146 N. 7th St. was the tallest in Temple Hill, reached by a flight of steps leading from the street. This home is where John Stam grew up and developed his faith.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# *Humble Beginnings*

Peter and Amelia Stam eventually had nine children—six sons and three daughters. Their second daughter, Catherine, died of bronchial pneumonia at ten months old. As parents they intended to teach their children the Word of God and conservative values from an early age. The family motto was Ebenezer—“Hitherto hath the Lord helped us” (1 Sam. 7:12). Peter created and installed a stained-glass window with the phrase in the Stam house on N. 7th St. as a reminder for his family to be faithful with all that God has given. Not far from their home was the Christian grammar school where all the children were enrolled.

At home a Bible was placed on the table for each person during their meals, three times a day. Before the food was served, a prayer was given, and a chapter read by each family member. The Bible was the foundation of the Stam household. Books and music were the other pieces that bound the family together. “We certainly were brought up on books,” recalled the eldest sister, Clazina, “and we all had to take music lessons. Father spared no expense to give us the best in these ways. And how we did enjoy our family orchestra!” The siblings would go on to use their musical abilities in various facets of ministry while growing up and into adulthood.

To safeguard their hearts from potentially negative spiritual influences, Mr. and Mrs. Stam chose not to have a radio in their home and discouraged their children from smoking, dancing, and attending movies. To try and make up for their children “missing out” on these worldly activities, the family often took sailing trips along the East Coast and went sightseeing in New York City. Peter and Amelia wanted their children to know how much they were appreciated, but that their work for Christ was the end reward that should fulfill their desire to serve Him.

During this time, Peter was active in Paterson's Third Christian Reformed Church as an elder and Sunday school teacher. Even as his business endeavors were taking off, Peter wanted to start his own ministry to help the underprivileged Paterson community. His ministry started as an outreach to Jews by distributing Christian literature and evangelizing through his personal testimony. Peter established the Star of Hope Mission in 1913, which served his ultimate vision of bringing the gospel to the residents around Paterson. The name Star of Hope was suggested by Rev. Van Vlaanderen after conversing with Peter about the ministry. A neatly furnished mission hall was soon acquired where witnessing could be done to those coming in from the street. As work for the mission grew, Peter recruited volunteers from local churches who helped reach the homeless, local prisons, hospitals, and various charity groups. The family always respected Mr. Stam's authority, never questioning it. Attending the Star of Hope meetings was expected of the children, even if their father didn't say so. Peter later started three missions in the Netherlands to help teach and equip others.

John Cornelius Stam, born January 18, 1907, was the Stams' seventh child and fifth son. As part of the Christian Reformed Church tradition, John was dedicated to the Lord when he was baptized at less than a month old. He grew up attending the same grammar school as his siblings where Scripture and Christian principles were reinforced. As a student, John was a quiet yet courteous boy who was sharp when it came to fine details, and always eager to help those in need. At a young age he would sew a button on his own clothing rather than going to his mother to do it, or take the initiative of uprooting a tree himself without being asked. After John graduated from the grammar school, his father offered to help him financially to seek out higher education. John wanted to pursue business instead and attended the Drake Business School for two years, where he gained experience in bookkeeping and stenography. Though only fifteen years old when enrolled, he was already over six feet tall and possessed the look of a young man in his early twenties. Growing up in this Christian environment, John was expected to adopt the lifestyle of his older siblings—but this wasn't the case, as he struggled with inner doubts about his work ability. He didn't get involved as much as his siblings at the



mission his father started, and he questioned whether he'd be able to make it in the business world.

As the spiritual need for the city grew, John's father wanted to build a mission hall that could hold more people and be an even greater outreach to the community. Peter acquired a piece of land with an old livery stable and planned to renovate it for his mission purposes. With a growing number of Christian supporters and much of his own finances, the building was bought for \$12,000. On April 21, 1919, the new Star of Hope Mission opened on 34 Broadway in Paterson. At the same time, Peter disposed of his lumber and contracting business—and because the Lord had prospered his previous work, he labored without salary.

Peter took the family motto of Ebenezer—"Hitherto hath the Lord helped us"—and revised it to "Hitherto hath the Lord done it all." The new building had a total of nineteen rooms used for offices, Sunday school, sewing classes, and other needs. The most impressive addition was the auditorium, large enough to seat six hundred people, where many evangelistic meetings were conducted in the decades to follow. The Stam residence often hosted the many guest speakers who appeared at the Star of Hope, including such notable names as Geraldine Taylor, Thomas Lambie, Donald Barnhouse, Arno C. Gaebelein, and Harry A. Ironside. Meeting these missionaries and Bible teachers left an indelible impression on many of the children growing up in their teens and twenties.

Thomas Houston, a blind evangelist from Scotland, gave a series of sermons at the mission during the spring of 1922. Seated in the last row, John, Neil, and their older brother Jacob (Jake) Stam listened intently one Sunday evening. John and Neil were so convicted by the preaching that before the meeting finished they decided to slip out during the last hymn, afraid Pastor Houston might give an altar call to receive Christ. They went home without saying a word to each other, leaving the rest of their family at the revival.

Later that night a woman called the Stam home with some troubling news: "Mr. Stam, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but I'm afraid John and Neil have been drinking. I saw them come home and they were both staggering." John and Neil were under so much conviction of sin that the

brothers had unsteady feet on their walk home. Peter was relieved after his sons explained the situation. Jacob prayed with his younger brothers to receive the gift of salvation, and afterward wrote in his study Bible opposite Acts 16:31: “‘And thy house’—May 28, 1922, Cornelius Stam and John Stam decided for Christ, believing on Him.” The rest of the family shared in the joy that night with John and Neil.

After receiving this gift, John knew that it had to be shared. The calling didn't start out easy for him though. The next day John went to the business school, and while at his desk he pondered the sins and struggle of self-righteousness he dealt with as a teenager. John had witnessed drunkards and people ignorant of the gospel getting saved through his family's ministry, but up to that point had thought of himself as morally superior. In years prior, John and his younger brother would avoid many of the city streets where their father and Christian friends were holding open-air meetings, embarrassed they might be seen by classmates. Soon after his conversion, John was surprised that he hadn't seen any of the meetings being held like he was used to. Inwardly curious, he asked his father why the band was not out preaching. “It's up to you, John, to make a beginning,” was Mr. Stam's response. With this realization, John knew he had to take a stand for what he believed. Nearly all the summer evenings which followed, John and Neil were seen fearlessly preaching together on the various street corners of Paterson, for a great burden had been lifted off their hearts.

John completed his training at the business college the following year. Over the course of the next six years he worked as a stenographer and clerk in several Paterson and New York business homes, while also volunteering at the Star of Hope Mission. In New York his office windows overlooked Battery Park, where he saw the shipping yards with their heavy freight being transported around the world. Sometimes he'd walk down the city's notable boulevards such as Broadway and Fifth Avenue, always expanding his worldview. He once walked the entire length of Manhattan Island. Though his family was never much for worldly entertainment, John's parents always supported music, so they encouraged their children to attend concerts. In their late teens, John and Neil would often take the train on Saturday afternoons

to attend concerts at Carnegie Hall. One such performance John attended featured Sergei Rachmaninoff, who played his famous composition, “Prelude in C-sharp Minor,” bringing seven encores.

New York City established its place in the Roaring Twenties, and John witnessed much of the consumerism of that era. Realizing the world had so many lost people and wanting to devote himself to full-time ministry, John announced his resignation in spring 1929. The office employer pleaded with him to stay, not wanting to lose a dedicated and reliable worker, but John’s mind was made up.

Shortly after his resignation, Peter and Amelia Stam made a trip to Holland, leaving John and Neil to oversee the Star of Hope Mission. Not long after his parents left, however, John realized the challenge of running the ministry. One morning as John prayed about the matter, he stated, “I am the wrong man to have anything to do with this.” Just then he lifted his eyes and noticed a plaque hanging on the opposite wall. The plaque had been on the wall for months, but John never took notice of its message. The text was Psalm 18:32: “It is God that girdeth me with strength, and maketh my way perfect.” The verse reminded John to faithfully carry on the task assigned to him for the family mission, but he also realized in that moment how much he had to learn about vocational ministry. At age twenty-two, most would have believed John was content with life, with financial stability and his family close by, but the desire for further biblical training was heavily put upon his heart. After praying a few more weeks while volunteering time to the Star of Hope that summer, John enrolled at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

### **John Stam's Testimony**

September 3, 1932

I thank God tonight that I am a Christian. I don't know how many times in the last weeks and months that thought has come to my mind and heart. But no matter how much it comes it ought to be there a great deal more. I thank God I am a Christian and I thank Him for a Christian home; for father and mother who brought me up in the ways of the Lord. I look back at the time when I was in deep conviction of sin in May 1922; when week after week I had been hearing the Word of God. A blind man was here preaching the Word of God. How many times I sat in that corner and wanted to come forward, but I didn't. One morning after he had given the invitation I was sitting in the back with Jake. He asked the unsaved to stand and then he asked Christians to stand up. I never did like that way of doing things and I don't now. But I didn't have the courage of my convictions to stay seated and I stood up and Jake turned around and said, "Praise the Lord; you're a Christian. Why don't you go up?" But I didn't want to do that. I let it go through that I had taken the Lord Jesus. How happy everyone was at home! But I wasn't really saved until the next day at business school. I realized I was a hypocrite and did not have the courage of my convictions, and let my people believe I had accepted Christ when I hadn't. How I thank Him for the message of salvation and that He saved even me.

Just these last three or four weeks I had the privilege of living among unsaved people day and night. I have worked with unsaved people, but never lived with them. I got to see something of the beauty of our salvation. Oh to know God has given us something real! As I looked into their lives and talked with them and heard their hopes and aims, having nothing in life that was worthwhile; and if they were going out through the shadows they had nothing and as I talked with the moralist, the fine men who went to church, the greatest thing he thought a man could do to show people he was a Christian was to give a big check to his employees. I came out of that with another thing to thank the Lord Jesus for; not only that I am saved, but that I have a message to bring to people that have nothing real in life; who have a certain amount of fear because when they came close up to the end they had fear, and if believed would bring them into the glory of an eternal salvation. How I thank God for that wonderful salvation that is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1929 Dad went to Holland with mother, to see the missions and on a little vacation trip. He left the mission in charge of my brother Neil and myself. After dad had been out to sea about a day or two, I began to realize that I was not the right kind of a person to have anything to do with the mission. I was up in that room having prayer, and I was beginning to see, as we will see, trouble among the workers and meetings dwindling in interest and helpfulness, and I was saying, "I am the wrong man to have anything to do with this." Suddenly I lifted up my eyes and there was a text on the opposite wall. The text had been there for weeks and months but never had I noticed it before. This was the verse:

Psalm 18:32. It is God that girdeth me with strength, and maketh my way perfect.

Oh what a blessing that verse was to me that morning! To realize it wasn't in my strength, but it was God. God was the one who did it. David wrote that, and David was the man who slew a lion and bear. It was that man who said it was God that girded him with that strength. When we get to realize we have no might, to them will He give power; to the one that is faint, to that one He will give strength.

Several weeks ago when I came home, I went to my room and was rather sick and tired and not much fit to go into the work of the Lord, not even in China. I opened the draw in the desk and the very first text that met my eyes was the one that I saw up in that room. And this time I needed it more than before. Oh men and women, I want to ask you to do this: that God will ever keep me where His power can flow through. I know how it is to become so busy with things that we are unable and do not find time to dig into His Word and to spend time in prayer with Him. But if I don't do that, what is the use of going out at all? What is the use if God doesn't gird me with strength? Will you not pray that every day I may find that fresh strength that comes from Him. That I shall feel the need of Himself each day and have to go aside and spend time alone with Him. Aren't you, aren't we all glad that tonight we can say, "It is God that girdeth us with strength!"

Pray for me. Thank you.

John C. Stam

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