

LIFE AND PORTRAITURE

of
CHRISTMAS EVANS

A New Translation from the Welsh
with a
Memoir of the Author

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

POWERFUL SERMONS

In 1794, the South West Baptist Association was held at Velin Voel, in Caermarthenshire. Mr. Evans was invited, as one of the preachers on the occasion. It was a journey of about two hundred miles. He undertook it on foot, with his usual fortitude, preaching at different places as he went along.

The meeting was to commence with three consecutive sermons, the last of which was to be preached by Mr. Evans. The service was out of doors, and the heat was very oppressive. The first and second sermons were rather tedious, and the hearers seemed almost stupefied. Mr. Evans arose and began his sermon. Before he had spoken fifteen minutes, scores of people were on their feet, some weeping, some praising, some leaping and clapping their hands for joy. Nor did the effect end with the discourse. Throughout the evening, and during the whole night, the voice of rejoicing and prayer was heard in every direction; and the dawning of the next day, awaking the few that had fallen asleep through fatigue, only renewed the heavenly rapture.

“Job David, the Socinian,” said the preacher afterwards to a friend, “was highly displeased with this American gale.” But all the Socinians in Wales could not counteract its influence or frustrate its happy effects.

Mr. Evans continued to visit the associations in South Wales for many years: and whenever he came, the people flocked by thousands to hear “the one-eyed man of Anglesea.”

It was on one of those occasions, and under circumstances somewhat similar to the above, that he preached that singularly effective sermon on the demoniac of Gadara. The meeting had been in progress three days and several discourses had been delivered with little or no effect. Christmas Evans took the stand, and announced as his text the evangelical account of the demoniac of Gadara.

He described him as a naked man, with flaming eyes, and wild and fierce gesticulation; full of relentless anger, and subject to strange paroxysms of rage; the terror and pity of all the townsfolk. They had bound him with great chains, but he would break them as Samson broke the withes. They had tried to soothe him by kindness, but he would leap upon them like a furious wild beast, or burst away with the speed of a stag, his long hair streaming on the wind behind him.

He inhabited the rocks of a Jewish cemetery; and when he slept, he laid down in a tomb. The place was a little out of town, and not far from the great turnpike road, so that people passing often saw him, and heard his dreadful lamentations and blasphemies. Nobody dared to cross his path unarmed, and all the women and children ran away as soon as they saw him coming.

Sometimes he sallied forth from his dismal abode at midnight, like one risen from the dead, howling and cursing like a fiend, breaking into houses, frightening the inhabitants from their beds, and driving them to seek shelter in the streets and the fields.

He had a broken-hearted wife and five little children, living about a mile and a half distant. In his intervals of comparative calmness, he would set out to visit them. On his way, the evil spirit would come upon him, and transform the husband and father instantly into a fury. Then he would run toward the house, raving like a wounded tiger, and roaring like a lion upon his prey. He would spring against the door, and shatter it into fragments; while the poor wife and children fled through the back door to the neighbors, or concealed themselves in the cellar. Then he would spoil the furniture, and break all the dishes, and bound away howling again to his home in the cemetery.

The report of this mysterious and terrible being had spread through all the surrounding region, and everybody dreaded and pitied the man among the tombs. Jesus came that way. The preacher described the interview, the miracle, and the happy change in the sufferer, the transporting surprise of his long afflicted family.

Then, shifting the scene, he showed his hearers the catastrophe of the swine, the flight of the affrighted herdsman, his amusing report to his master, and the effect of the whole upon the populace. All this was done with such dramatic effect, as to convulse his numerous hearers with alternate laughter and weeping for more than half an hour.

Having thus elicited an intense interest in the subject, he proceeded to educe from the narrative several important doctrines, which he illustrated so forcibly, and urged so powerfully, that the people first became profoundly serious, then wept like mourners at a funeral, and finally threw themselves on the ground, and broke forth in loud prayers for mercy; and the preacher continued nearly three hours, the effect increasing till he closed.

One who heard that wonderful sermon says, that, during the first half hour, the people seemed like an assembly in a theater, delighted with an amusing play; after that, like a community in mourning, over some great and good man, cut off by a sudden calamity; and at last, like the inhabitants of a city shaken by an earthquake, rushing into the streets, falling upon the earth, and screaming and calling upon God!

SANDEMANIANISM AND SABELLIANISM

About this time arose among the Baptists of North Wales a bitter and distracting controversy, concerning Sandemanianism and Sabellianism, which had been introduced by the Rev. Mr. Jones, a man of considerable learning and influence in the denomination.

Mr. Evans was at first inclined to fall in with these doctrines, and participated largely in the strife of tongues. He says:

“The Sandemanian system affected me so far as to quench the spirit of prayer for the conversion of sinners, and it induced in my mind a greater regard for the smaller things of the kingdom of heaven than for the greater. I lost the strength which clothed my mind with zeal, confidence and earnestness in the pulpit for the conversion of souls to Christ. My heart retrograded, in a manner, and I could not realize the testimony of a good conscience. Sabbath nights, after having been in the day exposing and vilifying with all bitterness the errors that prevailed, my conscience felt as if displeased, and reproached me that I had lost nearness to, and walking with God. It would intimate that something exceedingly precious was now wanting in me; I would reply, that I was acting in obedience to the Word; but it continued to accuse me of the want of some precious article. I had been robbed, to a great degree, of the spirit of prayer and of the spirit of preaching.”

Mr. Evans thus describes the effect of this controversy upon his people:

“The Sandemanian spirit began to manifest itself in the counties of Merioneth, Caernarvon, Anglesea, and Denbigh, and the first visible effect was the subversion of the hearers, for which the system was peculiarly adapted; intimating, as it did, that to Babylon the crowd of hearers always belonged. We lost, in Anglesea, nearly all those who were accustomed to attend with us; some of them joined other congregations; and, in this way, it pulled down nearly all that had been built up in twelve or fifteen years, and made us appear once again a mean and despicable party in the view of the country. The same effects followed it in a greater or lesser degree in the other counties noticed; but its principal station appears to have been in Merionethshire; this county seems to have been particularly prepared for its reception, and here it achieved by some means a sort of supremacy.”

TIME OF REFRESHING

Mr. Evans had been a long time in this controversy, destitute of all religious enjoyment, or, to use his own expressive phrase, “**as dry as Gilboa**,” when he experienced a remarkable refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

The following account is extracted from his journal:

“I was weary of a cold heart towards Christ, and his sacrifice, and the work of his Spirit — of a cold heart in the pulpit, in secret prayer, and in the study. For fifteen years previously, I had felt my heart burning within, as if going to Emmaus with Jesus. On a day ever to be remembered by me, as I was going from Dolgelley to Machynlleth, and climbing up towards Cadair Idris, I considered it to be incumbent upon me to pray, however hard I felt my heart, and however worldly the frame of my spirit was.

“Having begun in the name of Jesus, I soon felt as it were the fetters loosening, and the old hardness of heart softening, and, as I thought, mountains of frost and snow dissolving and melting within me. This engendered confidence in my soul in the promise of the Holy Ghost. I felt my whole mind relieved from some great bondage: tears flowed copiously, and I was constrained to cry out for the gracious visits of God, by restoring to my soul the joy of his salvation; — and that he would visit the churches in Anglesea that were under my care.

“I embraced in my supplications all the churches of the saints and nearly all the ministers in the principality by their names. This struggle lasted for three hours: it rose again and again, like one wave after another, or a high flowing tide, driven by a strong wind, until my nature became faint by weeping and crying. Thus I resigned myself to Christ, body and soul, gifts and labors — all my life — every day and every hour that remained for me; — and all my cares I committed to Christ. The road was mountainous and lonely, and I was wholly alone, and suffered no interruption in my wrestlings with God.

“From this time, I was made to expect the goodness of God to churches and to myself. Thus the Lord delivered me and the people of Anglesea from being carried away by the flood of Sandemanianism.

In the first religious meetings after this, I felt as if I had been removed from the cold and sterile regions of spiritual frost, into the verdant fields of the divine promises. The former striving with God in prayer, and the longing anxiety for the conversion of sinners, which I had experienced at Lëyn, was now restored. I had a hold of the promises of God.

“The result was, when I returned home, the first thing that arrested my attention was, that the Spirit was working also in the brethren in Anglesea, inducing in them a spirit of prayer, especially in two of the deacons, who were particularly importunate that God would visit us in mercy, and render the word of his grace effectual amongst us for the conversion of sinners.”

COVENANT WITH GOD

Mr. Evans now entered into a solemn covenant with God.

He made, as he says, “under a deep sense of the evil of his heart, and in dependence upon the infinite grace and merit of the Redeemer.”

This interesting article is preserved among his papers. We give it entire, as a specimen of his spirit and his faith:

1. *“I give my soul and body unto thee, Jesus, the true God, and everlasting life — deliver me from sin, and from eternal death, and bring me into life everlasting. Amen. — C. E.*
2. *“I call the day, the sun, the earth, the trees, the stones, the bed, the table, and the books to witness that I come unto thee, Redeemer of sinners that I may obtain rest for my soul from the thunders of guilt and the dread of eternity. Amen. — C. E.*
3. *“I do, through confidence in thy power, earnestly entreat thee to take the work into thine own hand, and give me a circumcised heart, that I may love thee, and create in me a right spirit, that I may seek thy glory. Grant me that principle which thou wilt own in the Day of Judgment, that I may not then assume palefacedness, and find myself a hypocrite. Grant me this, for the sake of thy most precious blood. Amen. — C. E.*
4. *“I entreat thee, Jesus, the Son of God, in power; grant me, for the sake of thy agonizing death, a covenant-interest in thy blood, which cleanseth; in thy righteousness, which justifieth; and in thy redemption, which delivereth. I entreat an interest in thy blood, for thy blood’s sake, and a part in thee, for thy name’s sake, which thou hast given among men. Amen. — C. E.*
5. *“Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, take, for the sake of thy cruel death, my time, and strength, and the gifts and talents I possess; which, with a full purpose of heart, I consecrate to thy glory in the building up of thy church in the world, for thou art worthy of the hearts and talents of all men. Amen. — C. E.*
6. *“I desire thee, my great High Priest, to confirm, by thy power, from thy High Court, my usefulness as a preacher, and my piety as a Christian, as two gardens nigh to each other; that sin may not have place in my heart, to becloud my confidence in thy righteousness, and that I may not be left to any foolish act that may occasion my gifts to wither, and rendered useless before my life ends. Keep thy gracious eye upon me, and watch over me, my Lord, and my God forever! Amen. — C. E.*
7. *“I give myself in a particular manner to thee, O Jesus Christ, the Saviour, to be preserved from the falls into which many stumble, that thy name (in thy cause) may not be blasphemed or wounded, that my peace may not be injured, that thy people may not be grieved, and that thine enemies may not be hardened. Amen. — C. E.*
8. *“I come unto thee, beseeching thee to be in covenant with me in my ministry. As thou didst prosper Bunyan, Vavasor Powell, Howell Harris, Rowlands, and Whitefield, do thou prosper me. Whatsoever things are opposed to my prosperity, remove them out of the way. Work in me every-thing approved of God, for the attainment of this. Give me a heart sick of love to thyself, and to the souls of men. Grant that I may experience the power of thy word before I deliver it, as Moses felt the power of his own rod, before he saw it on the land and waters of Egypt. Grant this, for the sake of thine infinitely precious blood, Jesus, my hope, and my all in all! Amen. — C. E.*

9. *“Search me now, and lead me in plain paths of judgment. Let me discover in this life what I am before thee, that I may not find myself of another character, when I am shown in the light of the immortal world, and open my eyes in all the brightness of eternity. Wash me in thy redeeming blood. Amen. — C. E.*

10. *“Grant me strength to depend upon thee for food and raiment, and to make known my requests. Let thy care be over me as a covenant-privilege betwixt thee and myself, and not like a general care to feed the ravens that perish, and clothe the lily that is cast into the oven; but let thy care be over me as one of thy family, as one of thine unworthy brethren. Amen. — C. E.*

11. *“Grant, O Jesus! And take upon thyself the preparing of me for death, for thou art God; there is no need, but for thee to speak the word. If possible, thy will be done; leave me not long in affliction, nor to die suddenly, without bidding adieu to my brethren, and let me die in their sight, after a short illness. Let all things be ordered against the day of removing from one world to another, that there be no confusion nor disorder, but a quiet discharge in peace. Grant me this, for the sake of thine agony in the garden! Amen. — C. E.*

12. *“Grant blessed Lord! That nothing may grow and be matured in me, to occasion thee to cast me off from the service of the sanctuary, like the sons of Eli; and for the sake of thine unbounded merit, let not my days be longer than my usefulness. Let me not be like lumber in a house in the end of my days, — in the way of others to work. Amen. — C. E.*

13. *“I beseech thee, Redeemer! To present these my supplications before the Father: and O! Inscribe them in thy book with thine own immortal pen, while I am writing them with my mortal hand, in my book on earth. According to the depths of thy merit, thine undiminished grace, and thy compassion, and thy manner unto thy people, O! Attach thy name, in thine upper court, to these unworthy petitions; and set thine amen to them, as I do on my part of the covenant. Amen.*

— Christmas Evans, Llangevni, Anglesea, April 10, 18.”

Mr. Evans, in speaking of this solemn transaction and its influence upon his spirit, subsequently observes:

“I felt a sweet peace and tranquility of soul, like unto a poor man that had been brought under the protection of the royal family, and had an annual settlement for life made upon him; from whose dwelling the painful dread of poverty and want had been for ever banished away.”

Thus **“strengthened with might in the inner man,”** he labored with renewed energy and zeal, and showers of blessings descended upon his labors.

In two years, his ten preaching places in Anglesea were increased to twenty, and six hundred converts were added to the church under his care. The wilderness and solitary place were glad for them, and the desert rejoiced and blossomed as the rose.

STUDYING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Mr. Evans made several visits to Liverpool, Bristol, and other parts of England. On these occasions he was frequently solicited to preach in English, to which he several times consented, to the great gratification of his English friends. These sermons evinced the same energy of thought and the same boldness of imagery, as those which he preached in Welsh; but in the power of his peculiar delivery, they were inevitably far inferior. His brethren in England were much delighted with his performances, and said it was no wonder the Welsh were warm under such preaching; but his language was broken and hesitating, and they could scarcely have any conception of his animation and energy when he spoke in his vernacular tongue.

His success induced him to commence a systematic study of the English language that he might be able to preach in it with greater freedom and effect. He could read English before, and was somewhat familiar with the best English authors of his day; but never acquainted himself with the grammar of the language till he was thirty-three years of age. But read his own account of the Matter:

“The English brethren had prevailed upon me to preach to them in broken English, as it was; this induced me to set about the matter in earnest, making it a subject of prayer, for the aid of the Spirit, that I might be in some measure a blessing to the English friends, for there appeared some sign that God now called me to this department of labor in his service. I never succeeded in anything for the good of others, without making it a matter of prayer My English preaching was very broken and imperfect in point of language; yet, through the grace of Jesus Christ, it was made in some degree useful at Liverpool, Bristol, and some other places. I was about forty years old when I learned to read the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Testament, and use Parkhurst's Lexicons in both languages.

”I found that, had I studied the English language attentively and perseveringly, I should be able to overcome great difficulties; and also, that I could without much labor in the course of few years, even in my idle hours, as it were, understand all the Hebrew words corresponding with every Welsh word in the Bible; and so also the Greek. I had always before thought that it was impossible to accomplish this, for I had no one to encourage me in the undertaking; but I found it was practicable, and proved it in some measure, yet relinquished the pursuit on account of my advanced age.”

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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