

LIFE AND PORTRAITURE

of
CHRISTMAS EVANS

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

by

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CHAPTER TWO

EARLY YEARS

Christmas Evans was the second son of Samuel and Joanna Evans. He was born at Ysgarwen, Cardiganshire, South Wales, on the 25th of December, 1776. His birth happening on Christmas day suggested his Christian name.

Samuel and Joanna Evans were poor and unable to educate their children; and at the age of seventeen, Christmas could not read a word. When he was only nine years old, he lost his father and went to live with his uncle, who was a farmer, and a very wicked man. Here he spent several years of his youthful life, daily witnessing the worst of examples, and experiencing the unkindest of treatment. He subsequently engaged as a servant to several farmers successively in his native parish.

During these years he met with a number of serious accidents, in some of which he narrowly escaped with his life. Once he was stabbed in a quarrel. Once he was so nearly drowned as to be with difficulty resuscitated. Once he fell from a very high tree, with an open knife in his hand. On another occasion a horse ran away with him, passing at full speed through a low and narrow passage.

PROFESSION OF RELIGION

His first religious impressions he dates from his father's funeral. "But they were fitful and evanescent," to use his own language. "They vanished and recurred once and again."

When he was eighteen years of age an awakening occurred among the young people of his neighborhood.

Christmas himself was much terrified with the fear of death and judgment, and became very serious in his deportment, and joined the Armenian Presbyterians at Llwynrhydowen.

His Christian experience was evidently very imperfect. He had a conviction of the evil of sin, and a desire to flee from the wrath to come; but no evidence of acceptance with God, and a very limited knowledge of the plan of salvation. Yet his religious impressions were not entirely fruitless. They produced, at least, a partial reformation of life, and led to many penitential resolutions. He thought much of eternity, and was frequent in secret prayer.

He soon felt a strong desire to understand the Scriptures, and with this view began to learn to read.

According to his own account, "There was not one in seven in those parts at that time that knew a letter." Almost entirely unaided, he prosecuted his purpose; and in an incredibly short time was able to read his Bible.

COMMENCEMENT OF PREACHING

He was now called upon to exercise his gifts in public prayer and exhortation. "To this," he says, "I felt a strong inclination, though I knew myself a mass of spiritual ignorance."

His first performance was so generally approved, that he felt greatly encouraged to proceed. Shortly afterward, he preached a sermon at a prayer-meeting, in the parish of Llangeler, county of Caermarthen.

The discourse, however, was not original, but a translation from Bishop Beveridge. He also committed one of the Rev. Mr. Rowland's sermons, and preached it in the neighborhood of the church to which he belonged. A gentleman who heard him expressed great astonishment at such a sermon from an unlettered boy. The mystery was solved the next day; he found the sermon in a book. "But I have not done thinking," said he, "that there is something great in the son of Samuel the shoemaker, for his prayer was as good as the sermon."

His opinion of the young preacher would probably have suffered some further abatement if he had known that the prayer itself was memorized!

Young Evans now received frequent invitations to preach, in sundry places, for different denominations; especially in the Baptist church, at Penybont, Llandysil.

He spoke occasionally in the pulpits of several eminent ministers. All who heard him were delighted with his discourses, and gave him much encouragement. These labors drew him into the society of many excellent Christians. He seems to have profited by their godly conversation, and soon acquired an experimental knowledge of justification by faith, though the witness of the Spirit was not so clear as in many and he could never fix upon any particular time when he obtained the blessing.

BACKSLIDING AND RECOVERY

The young preacher shortly felt the need of a little more learning, to qualify him for his calling. He commenced going to school to the Rev. Mr. Davis, his pastor, and devoted himself for about six months to the study of Latin.

This involved him in pecuniary distress. He took a journey into England, to labor during the harvest season, for the purpose of replenishing his purse, and enabling him to continue his studies. While thus engaged, he fell into temptation, and his religious feelings suffered a sad declension. He thought of relinquishing the school and the ministry, and devoting his life to secular pursuits. While revolving this matter in his mind, the children of the wicked one came upon him and buffeted him back to his duty. He was waylaid by a mob, who had determined to kill him. They beat him so severely, that he lay for a long time insensible; and one of them gave him a blow upon his left eye, which occasioned its total blindness through the rest of his life.

“That night,” says he, “I dreamed that the day of judgment was come. I saw Jesus on the clouds, and all the world on fire. I was in great fear, yet crying earnestly, and with some confidence, for his peace. He answered and said: ‘Thou thoughtest to be a preacher; but what wilt thou do now? The world is on fire, and it is too late!’ On this I awoke, and felt heartily thankful that I was in bed.”

This dream produced a deep impression upon his mind, and recovered him from his spiritual declension. He began to preach with renewed energy and success, and all his friends predicted that he would yet become “a great man, and a celebrated preacher.”

CHANGE OF VIEWS

There was living, about this time, at Aberduar, a Mr. Amos, who had left the Armenian Presbyterians, and joined the Calvinistic Baptists. He came to visit young Evans, and converse with him on the subject of baptism. The latter was unpracticed in argument, and little acquainted with the Scriptures.

He strove strenuously for a while, but was at length silenced by the superior skill of his antagonist. Encouraged by his success, Mr. Amos made him another visit, during which he shook his faith in the validity of infant baptism. After this he came again and again.

Mr. Evans was at length brought to believe there was no true baptism but immersion by a Baptist minister. Now it was suggested that he ought to be immersed. Other Baptist friends interested themselves in his case, and put into his hands such books as were best adapted to their purpose. He was shortly satisfied with what was his duty.

“After much struggling,” says he, “between the flesh and the spirit, between obedience and disobedience, I went to the Baptist church at Aberdaar, in the parish of Llanybyfaer, in the county of Caermar then. I was cordially received there, but not without a degree of dread, on the part of some, that I was still a stout-hearted Armenian.”

He was baptized with several others, by the pastor, Rev. Timothy Thomas, in the river Duar, and admitted to the communion of the church. This was in 1788, when Mr. Evans was about the age of 22.

It is not strange, that, after such a change, he should gradually imbibe the doctrine of election, and its concomitants, as held by the Calvinistic Baptists; but it is quite evident, not only by inference from his own account, but by information from other sources, that he had not yet relinquished his Armenian theology.

Whether he would have been more pious and useful, by adhering to his Armenian views, and remaining among his Armenian friends, is a question not for us to answer, and perhaps of little practical importance.

It is certain that he became a Calvinist of the highest school, and a burning and shining light among his Baptist brethren.

That the Calvinistic faith is not incompatible with eminent holiness of life; we have other evidence than that afforded by the history of Christmas Evans. The seraphic piety of a Bunyan, a Baxter, a Whitefield, and a Payson, should silence for ever the clamors of Armenian bigotry!

DEPRESSING VIEWS OF HIMSELF

For several years after this, Mr. Evans entertained painfully depressing views of his Christian character and ministerial talents. He thought every other believer had more light than himself, and every other preacher greater gifts. He called himself “a mass of ignorance and sin.”

He imagined his discourses entirely useless to his hearers. This he attributed partly to his habit of repeating them “memoriter”. Others appeared to him to speak extemporaneously, and he thought they received their sermons “directly from heaven,” while he, by memorizing his, forfeited the aid of the Holy Spirit.

“I therefore changed my method,” says he, “and took a text without any premeditation, and endeavored to speak what occurred to me at the time. If bad before, it was worse now. I had neither sense nor life, nothing but a poor miserable tone, which produced no effect upon the hearers, and made me really sick of myself. I thought God had nothing to do with me as a preacher. I had no confidence in my own talents and virtues, and the very sound of my voice discouraged me. I have since perceived the great goodness of God herein, preserving me from being puffed up by too good an opinion of my own gifts and graces which both before and since has proved fatal to many young preachers.”

These views of himself often occasioned him deep distress of mind. He entered the pulpit with dread. He conceived that the mere sight of him there was sufficient to becloud the hearts of his hearers, and intercept every ray of light from heaven. He could not ascertain that he had been the means of the salvation of a single soul during the five years of his preaching.

It might have been some relief to him, could he have ventured to develop to some judicious Christian friend the disquietude of his soul. But this he dared not do, lest he should be deemed an unconverted man in the ministry, and exposed as a hypocrite to the world. So he wrapped up the painful secret in his heart, and drank his wormwood alone.

From all this, what are we to infer? That Mr. Evans had never been converted, or was not now in favor with God? We think not. All who knew him had full confidence in his piety, and thought him an excellent Christian. Whether his attention to the subject of baptism, or the Calvinistic views he had recently imbibed, had acted injuriously upon his religious enjoyment, would be an unprofitable speculation, if not otherwise improper. Perhaps these distressing doubts were but the permitted buffetings of Satan, to preserve him from spiritual pride; the preparatory darkness, which enabled him more highly to appreciate, and more earnestly to recommend to others, “**the Bright and Morning Star.**” Many of God's chosen servants have been disciplined for their work in darkness.

Dr. Payson, during all the earlier part of his eminently useful ministry, and John Summerfield, when his sweet persuasive tongue was leading multitudes to the Cross, were constantly distressed with doubts of their own spiritual condition. Though it is certainly the privilege of every believer to know that he is “**a new creature in Christ Jesus,**” we cannot thence infer that all such as have not constantly the direct witness of the Spirit are in an unregenerate state.

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