

Whirlwind in the Welsh Valleys: Evan Roberts

by Brynmore P. Jones

Evan Roberts' ministry in Wales was marked by a unique approach that emphasized the power of the Holy Spirit, prayer, and praise, leading to a widespread revival and a lasting impact on the region.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 13:1, Galatians 5:25, James 5:16

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Revival Movement"

Description

Brynmore P. Jones shares the powerful story of Evan Roberts' unexpected visit to Aberdare, where a revival broke out with intense emotional experiences, public confessions of sins, and a deep sense of surrender to the Holy Spirit. Despite the unconventional methods of allowing spontaneous singing and speaking without a sermon, Evan Roberts' focus was on leading people to salvation and decision-making rather than just imparting knowledge. His ministry was marked by a deep compassion and a fervent plea for sinners and backsliders to embrace Jesus, emphasizing the sacrifice He made on the cross.

Transcript

Twelve miles north of the city of Cardiff, the villages of the Dare Valley housed hundreds of miners. At the head of the road leading into this valley was the town of Aberdare and its five satellite villages. Evan Roberts was not scheduled to preach in the area, but when officers of the Bryn Seion Chapel in Aberdare heard that he had cancelled his previously planned engagement, they invited the young student to substitute in their pulpit.

When a faithful few turned up for the morning service, the first thing they saw were two girls standing in the pulpit. No one had been told that Roberts would bring two earnest young ladies to sing and testify. They heard them praying and pleading that the people would surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit. As this strange service began, one of the girls gave her testimony in song and then suddenly burst into tears. The other girl did the same while the congregation stared perplexedly. Some wondered why the invited preacher had not opened his mouth. Then they saw that he, too, was weeping and pleading with God as he knelt in the pulpit.

Suddenly a chapel member fell to her knees, and her friends heard her confessing all her sins publicly. After that shock, there was a wave of sorrow and another wave of joy. Women knelt in pews, men lay down in the aisles, and a few stood there speaking joyfully about the blessing they now received. There was still no Bible reading or address, and the church organist stayed idle while the people sang hymns unaccompanied. Somehow people forgot to go home for their Sunday dinner--a thing almost unheard of in

South Wales in those days. Sunday school was canceled, and the evening service became a continuous prayer meeting.

On Monday morning the housewives in the shops and their husbands in the pits spoke in excited whispers about this strange event. Roberts and his "team" were invited to stay overnight because they wanted to continue their witness. The Aberdare branch of a Rationalist Society began to talk about the "unbalance," "unseemliness," and "hysteria" of the proceedings. Meanwhile, some of the chapel leaders met quietly and decided to make preparations for a week of revival meetings.

Ebenezer Chapel opened its doors very early on Monday evening, but no miner dreamed of going until he was bathed, fed, and clothed in his chapel suit. So a small and rather self-conscious congregation faced the girl singers as they began a time of prayer and praise that they called "warming the atmosphere." As more people arrived, they were amazed to see Evan Roberts coming in with them and just walking up and down the aisle. Soon he was swinging his arms, clapping his hands, jumping up and down at times, and always smiling warmly at each new arrival just as if he loved them.

At this Monday service he spoke about Christ's love and light. His hour-long address was more like a personal testimony than a sermon. The meeting went on well into the night and some of the workmen snatched only two hours of sleep before going back to the mine.

Those who hastened to the meetings didn't quite know what to make of this young man, Evan Roberts, who beamed at the people constantly and never lifted his voice to a preacher's shout. He was a puzzle to the average chapel member, who expected thunder and lightning from the pulpit. Many Welsh homes had bedroom pictures of the fiery-eyed preachers of old, such as John Elias and Christmas Evans. People expected a severe face and a dignified manner and certainly no habit of roaming about the chapel.

One can picture their faces when the presiding minister read out the names of thirty-three converts, and the revivalist threw his arms around the surprised clergyman and shouted ecstatically, "Is this not glorious?" No one could resist Evan's infectious joy for long. It was a mixture of youthful cheerfulness and thankfulness to an all-loving God and a great excitement as so many accepted Christ and stood up with radiant faces.

Robert's visit to Aberdare was like a pageant of praise, prayer, and testimony. The formerly closed frontiers of age, sex, language, and social background were crossed time and again. At length, Evan Roberts stood up in the big seat, a pew usually reserved for the deacons. Then he opened his New Testament and slowly and emphatically read the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. In a quiet and solemn voice he emphasized the words "If I have not love, I am nothing, nothing, nothing," and then he sat down. That was all he said for the evening, but it was enough.

There was another moment of high drama when a man who belonged to a local circle of agnostics tried to interrupt Evan's exhortations. He wanted to ask a question, he said, and he pushed forward toward the pulpit. But he never got there. The Holy Spirit overpowered the man, and he collapsed and had to be helped. He cried out for mercy and pardon. Soon there was a great outburst of joyful singing over a repentant rebel.

Four times during the mission to Aberdare and nearby Mountain Ash, Evan Roberts left the pulpit to deal with men and women in great spiritual distress who were either out of sight in a distant balcony or were actually outside in the graveyard or porch. The most striking incident was in an Aberdare chapel where a

prodigal son was coming home, never more to roam. The incident was noted by Mr. T. Williams in a memoir:

When the breath of the Almighty had filled the hall, Roberts directed his steps straight to the left-hand wall, like a doctor hastening to the sick. He fell to his knees alongside a young married man who was pleading earnestly. The young revivalist kept a clear circle round the praying one, lest anyone should disturb or impede his winning the battle. We saw him often pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to dry the man's sweat drops. How quickly his eyes had perceived the battle and how soon he had rushed to that place and become inflamed with love for him. The burden of his prayer was a plea to God to give the man the victory over Satan and strength to break out. Then the young man prayed, "Take the mud from my clothes for I have been in the gutter. Take the sin stain from my flesh; divorce me from secret iniquity." Roberts knew at once what steps to take to fight this battle. He stood above the pleader like a mother over a sick baby, and poured out the oil and wine of comforting prayers, brief testimonies and deep counsels. He had perceived the inner hardness of the battle going on in this soul. "Dear people," he said with a loud cry, "Here's a terrible battle and only prayer will conquer the fiends and buffet Satan. Pray on, people. Pray! Pray!" It was easy to see, as you looked at his face, that for a few moments he feared this battle and did not know how to turn it to advantage. His face betrayed the terrible anxiety felt towards the end of a birth.

One thing that many people could not understand was why Roberts allowed so many people to sing or speak, and why he didn't control meetings. Those who asked were told, "It is the Spirit alone who is leading us." When certain chapel members moaned that he had not turned up at their revival preparation meetings, he would say: "Don't wait for me. Wait for the Spirit. Someone tells me they are breaking their hearts for me not going. Will they also break their hearts for the Spirit?"

What mattered most to him was that the Spirit had promised that He would enter and abide. Journalists such as W. T. Stead marveled that the crowd inside and outside the chapel seemed to know by instinct when it was time to swallow up prayer in praise or to cut off the songs of praise in order to hear some quiet, humble prayer. To many observers, this was surely the seal of the Spirit.

There were other sincere worshipers who asked in great perplexity, "What has happened to the Scripture readings, and why has the service ended without a sermon?" W. T. Stead mentioned this oft-repeated lament when he asked Evan Roberts about his methods. Evan's reply showed a clear understanding of the needs of his own nation which had already been well taught by a number of gifted expositors. "Why should I teach when the Spirit is teaching? What need have these people to be told they are sinners? What they need is salvation. Do they not know it? It is not knowledge they lack but decision."

This refusal to teach could be justified in the special circumstances of Welsh Nonconformity, in which thousands of uncommitted people had at some time passed through the catechism and Scripture examinations. However, it would be quite invalid as a guideline for present-day missionaries who know the biblical illiteracy of the unreached multitudes and the equally terrible doctrinal ignorance of the church.

It should be noted that Evan Roberts behaved as an outspoken evangelist at times, even though he was primarily the quiet, humble instrument of revival. Most of the stories from Mountain Ash show him as purely the catalyst, moving quickly from meeting to meeting and, in each case, telling how revival would begin and explaining why they should pray. Yet there is also one report that gives an unforgettable picture of the effects of Evan Roberts' pleading with sinners and backsliders:

I want you listeners to receive Jesus. Do you see Him coming from the judgment seat with a crown of thorns on His holy head, and blood flowing down His cheeks, and His back flayed by whipping, and His face reddened with the bleeding, and that heavy cross on His back as He goes to Calvary--to die for you and me? I know that all of us would have wanted to help Him carry it. But you need to turn that sympathy into a flame of love before you can embrace Him as Savior. Who can forget Him?

As was typical of his practice, Roberts soon moved on from Aberdare to minister elsewhere and handed over leadership of the revival to others. It is interesting to note that the mighty revival flamed through Aberdare for another four months. It could not be extinguished even by an all-out attack in the Aberdare Leader. Indeed, the removal of Roberts to another valley made the charge that the revival depended on his hypnotic skills and magnetism lose all credibility. Exactly the same wonderful things happened when local pastors of revived churches took over the task of leadership.

It was abundantly clear to everyone who encountered Evan Roberts that God had given Wales a different kind of messenger who would not necessarily be a Bible expositor or an eloquent preacher but a man with a burden. God had sent him to warn, exhort, invite, and plead lovingly. Underlying this was a great compassion. On one occasion he was heard crying out passionately, "How can I repay Him for the privilege of going through Wales to proclaim His love?" His ministry in Wales gave him great opportunity to do just that.

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