

## 2. the Revivalist

by David Matthews

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*The sermon explores the life of Evan Roberts and the divine orchestration behind the Welsh revival, emphasizing the power of humble beginnings and unwavering faith.*

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 6:40

**Topics:** "Divine Providence", "Spiritual Revival"

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### Description

David Matthews preaches about God's divine methods in choosing leaders and servants for the Church, highlighting the wisdom in selecting the weak and despised to confound the mighty, ultimately bringing glory to Jesus Christ. The sermon delves into the humble origins and sincere faith of Evan Roberts, a coal miner turned world-known revivalist, emphasizing his unwavering zeal for God's work and the prophetic incidents that shaped his calling. Evan's transformation from a diligent student to a fervent intercessor for revival showcases the mysterious ways of Divine Providence, leading him to sacrifice his own plans for the greater purpose of leading a nation to spiritual awakening.

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### Transcript

God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty," is the classic expression of the apostle Paul, writing to the brilliant but egotistical assembly of Christians in Corinth. They were busy allocating to themselves leaders under whose banners they proudly and loudly enlisted, to their own spiritual detriment. This timely rebuke has provided an example of the unfailing wisdom of the divine methods in the choice of leaders and servants for the work of the Church. Human folly projects unwearingly about the brilliance of human intelligence. Divine methods, choosing "the base things of the world, and things which are despised," to perform the greatest exploits in the kingdom of God, throw into confusion the calculations of mere man. Thus they secure undisputed glory forever to the glorified Head of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mr. Evan Roberts came of humble origin. His parents were of the ordinary good, solid, religious type, steeped in Calvinistic theology; proud of the purity of their home life; glorying in their church life; scrupulously jealous of their moral life. One owes an incalculable debt to the atmosphere pervading such a home. "Island House," stood on the banks on the river "Llwchwr," where he and his friends, used to bathe and boat continually. Visitors from all parts of the earth came to view the unpretentious cottage, during the years following the revival. It was the constant rendezvous of the curious. All his acquaintances admitted the unquestioned sincerity of Mr. Roberts from his earliest days. Diligent in his attendance at "the means

of grace," he was unusually serious and solemn in his outlook on life's problems, persistently studious in his reading of the Scriptures--indeed, the Bible, we are told, was his unfailing companion wherever he went. Following the calling of a coal miner, he was once in a minor colliery explosion when a page of his priceless Bible was scorched by the fiery elements. Stranger still to record, it was the words in II Chronicles 6 which lay open at the time of the disaster, where Solomon prayed for revival, and which experienced the scorching tongue of devouring flame. When Mr. Roberts became world-known, a picture of this Bible went around the world.

Was this young man always dreaming of revival? The incident cited seemed prophetic. Once, we are told, he heard a sermon on the words, "But Thomas was not with them when Jesus came." It is reported that those words made an ineffaceable impression on the mind of the youth. Perhaps we find in this incident the secret for his unflagging zeal for the services of the sanctuary. Never did he turn back. Loughor, the birthplace of Mr. Roberts, is a small hamlet situated at the westerly end of the country of Glamorgan, separated from Caermarthenshire by the wide, graceful sweeps of the river Llŵchwr (the Celtic word for Loughor). It boasts the existence of several Nonconformist chapels--is there a single Welsh village that does not?--a good day school, and a village hall, a recent acquisition where modern youth assemble for the free discussion of current events. It is a local parliament. There are in the vicinity coal mines where Evan Roberts worked as a lad. Beyond the estuary gleams the golden coast of the glorious Gower Peninsula, famed for beauty.

When the revival burst forth in all its glory within the walls of Moriah Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, the unsophisticated inhabitants of the smug hamlet were like them that dreamed--they seemed to have been aroused out of the sleep of ages. Staggered by the strange, unheard-of sights, they wondered what was happening. Before they had completely recovered from surprise, the name of the village, Loughor, had become famous overnight.

For some years, the mind of Mr. Roberts had been turning in the direction of the Christian ministry. His spare time was avidly devoted to reading such literature as would assist in the preparation of his lifework. Although his friends "with one consent" acknowledged his undoubted religious sincerity and unspotted moral character, there does not appear to have been manifested, to the observant eyes of vigilant church leaders, any outstanding oratorical gift or special expository brilliance, such as is universally expected in Wales in a candidate for such an exalted office. Evan Roberts quietly persisted in the pursuit of his dream. Everything religious secured pre-eminence in his mind and heart. Every one of his acquaintances concluded "that Evan intended to be a preacher."

Contrary to the usual nature of a young lad, he does not appear to have enjoyed overmuch the impish pranks of the casual village boy. That was a great pity. For if a lad is capable of much frolic and fun and harmless naughtiness, there are often possibilities lying dormant in his nature for accomplishing great good. In saying that we are thinking of the intrepid tinker of Bedford, whose proverbial genius, used in wickedness in his unconverted days, resulted, when consecrated to highest service, in perennial blessing to God's children everywhere. Our revivalist seems to have been noted for his undemonstrative, studious habits when other boys romped and roamed, his reserved nature, and perhaps his religious inclinations, held him in a vise-like grip. Nature seems to have taken a queer turn in him. But who can judge in these matters? "There is a way the eye of the vulture hath not seen," declares the Book of Job. This may be one of them. That being so, even the keenest intellect lies prostrate before the majestic mysteries of Divine Providence.

One thing is certain--this particular young man was different from contemporaries. Was God already preparing him for the thrilling events lying immediately ahead, beyond his ken, when his name would be honored and talked of to the ends of the earth? In this case, assuredly, the end justified the means. Evan proceeded with his studies in an unpretentious manner, undisturbed by the opinion of others, favorable or unfavorable, and, in due time, the church at Moriah recommended him for the work of the ministry. This necessitated a preliminary period of study at the Newcastle Grammar School, where something took place which completely changed the current of his life, making him famous among the brilliant revivalists of Wales. Evan Roberts carved for himself a niche in the Hall of the Immortals. "Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth." It would necessitate the eloquence of the golden-mouthed Savonarola, or the facile pen of the dramatist-poet of Stratford-on-Avon, to describe adequately the glorious triumphs which followed the unceremonious departure of this young man from home. His avowed object was to pursue his ministerial studies, which, as we shall endeavor to portray later, never materialized. "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out. . . . Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariots: who walketh upon the wings of the wind." Reverently we bow before the majesty of God's awful throne.

Significant occurrences are sometimes advance intimations of earth-shaking events. Sometimes we find that infinitude lies buried within the bosom of a trifle. When a "still small voices" whispered to Augustine, "Take, and read"-- such a trifling occurrence--did anyone dream that the Church of God was about to be honored with one of the most brilliant preachers of all time? Did Wesley have a premonition, as he sauntered into that unadorned Moravian church in London's Aldersgate Street to hear pious Peter Bohler read Luther's commentary on Romans, that something would happen, ultimately sending a thrill of new life throughout Britain, and later, throughout the New World? Millions have since blessed God for that incident. Spurgeon found the snow so heavy upon the ground one Sunday morning that he decided to attend service in a little Methodist Church--an unorthodox thing for him to do, as he later confessed. But the unlettered local preacher had a good text that morning--"Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." Whatever may be thought of the sermon, that humble unknown man was unconsciously used of God to bring into the ecclesia another Paul. Many avow that when that Spurgeon lad in his teens was brought to Christ, the greatest preacher since apostolic days was converted. Evan Roberts crossed his Kedron to his Golgotha in a similar way. Here is the simple record of the happenings leading up to the mighty revival.

Seth Joshua, a name with a Hebrew tang to it, came to Newcastle Emlyn to conduct an evangelistic campaign under the auspices of the Calvinistic Methodist Forward Movement, a movement which had been recently inaugurated by the devout men of that denomination, who had long felt the need of doing something aggressive in order to reach and save the large non-church-going masses thronging Welsh mining towns and villages, Dr. John Pughe being the chief instigator. Mr. Joshua was their pioneer evangelist. He too, had been saved from a life of profligacy through, I believe, the instrumentality of the Salvation Army. Seth Joshua was every inch a "man of God." Every heartbeat had been dedicated and consecrated to the service of the Highest. This tribute is borne to his fadeless memory by this author, who enjoyed intimate fellowship with him in his later and riper years of Christian service and owes much to him.

The principal of the grammar school, John Phillips, using his great influence over the boys, earnestly advised them to attend the services whenever their studies permitted. Evan Roberts, so Mr. Phillips informed me in later years, was evidently impressed by the definiteness and fervor of the preacher. There seemed to be a strange, strong, new note about the messages by which he was entranced. Night after

night found him a most attentive listener, without demonstrative commendation. Fellow students, however, felt convinced that within his bosom "deep was calling unto deep," soon to break forth in a Niagara of blessing, submerging a whole nation. But the Newcastle Emlyn campaign concluded without any spontaneous manifestation of blessing. Indeed, Mr. Joshua told me that he was somewhat disappointed with the results--everything seemed hard and the people entirely unresponsive. He was permitted to live long enough to enjoy to the full the blessings and glory of it.

From that town, the evangelist moved to another smaller neighborhood on the coast of Cardigan Bay. Here "the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones," leaving behind it a few handfuls of sacred ashes as a memorial. Several of the grammar school students arranged to be taken to the place where the services were held. Among them was Evan Roberts, unconsciously approaching his holy Moriah. Reports differ somewhat regarding the occurrences at this memorable service. It appears that Mr. Joshua had experienced special hardness and difficulty in preaching. He was extremely sensitive and temperamental by nature. Those who knew him intimately would say that he was peculiarly influenced by the atmosphere of a service.

Almost in desperation, the evangelist prayed fervently at what seemed to be the close of the difficult meeting, "Bend us--bend us--bend us, O Lord !" Speaking humanly, many believe that this very sentence gave birth to the revival. It became famous. Evan Roberts repeated it times without number. A young woman sprang to her feet in terrible soul-agony--Maggie Evans, if my memory serves me right. At this moment, the silent form of a young man rolled off his seat into the aisle. He appeared to be only semi-conscious. God alone knows how the miracle happened. A lady sitting opposite the young man assured me that he lay prostrate for a considerable time on the floor of the church, sweating profusely. Nothing seemed more certain but that he would die on the spot. Well, he did die spiritually. But he "rose again in newness of life" in Christ, to lead thousands through a similar experience. Suddenly new life had been infused into the campaign. All through that night and the following day, indeed for several successive days, the services continued without any signs of weariness. Evan Roberts was to all appearances a new man after this experience.

Returning to school after this phenomenal baptism, studies for the future revivalist were more than difficult--they seemed utterly impossible. He discovered to his amazement that something had happened and now concentrated book-work was a mere drudgery. Day and night, without ceasing, he prayed, wept, and sighed for a great spiritual awakening for his beloved Wales. Hours were spent in unbroken, untiring intercession, to the chagrin of those who did not understand the symptoms and secret of soul-travail. One thing became clear to him--study was impossible for some unaccountable reason. He had to surrender unconditionally to this overwhelming, mysterious impulse, surging through his sensitive, awakened soul.

A vision was given him at this time, so we were informed, in response to these passionate, persistent petitions. It was that a great revival was about to break forth that would be felt to the ends of the earth. This encouraged him tremendously. Although a young man of fine physique, his strong body felt the strain of this crushing burden. Heavenly power swept over him as he pleaded for a lost world, lost beyond hope, and no one to weep for it. Could he continue his studies with this load burdening him night and day, granting him no respite? No! He must go and tell his friends. Others must hear about it even if he died in the effort of proclaiming the glad tidings. Whatever the cost, go he must. It was a tragic moment for him and multitudes of others. Few know the agony of such great decisions. Wycliffe, before his traducers--Luther defending the gospel in Worms, William Carey deciding for India, Hudson Taylor venturing out by faith to save the submerged millions of tormented China--moments such as these never

die. Evan Roberts was compelled to turn away from what appeared to be his lifework--preparation for the ministry--to lead a nation to Calvary.

"Go home," said the Holy Spirit to Bran Roberts, "and tell the young people of your church what great thing has happened to you." Immediately, without consulting or pandering to flesh and blood, he went. When our Lord visited His home town of Nazareth, "He could do there no mighty work . . . And he marveled because of their unbelief."

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