

Daniel Rowlands - Part 1

by J.C. Ryle

Daniel Rowlands was a Welsh clergyman who, after a dramatic conversion, became a powerful preacher, leading to conversions, spiritual growth, and a lasting impact on his hearers.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, John 7:17, 1 Corinthians 6:11

Topics: "The Power of Preaching", "Faithfulness in Ministry"

Description

J.C. Ryle introduces Daniel Rowlands, a lesser-known yet significant spiritual leader of the 18th century, whose powerful preaching transformed the spiritual landscape of Wales. Despite his humble beginnings and limited recognition outside Wales, Rowlands drew enormous crowds and had a profound impact on his congregations, awakening many to the realities of sin and salvation. His ministry, marked by a deep commitment to the gospel, faced challenges, including his eventual ejection from the Church of England, yet he continued to preach with fervor and effectiveness until his death. Rowlands' legacy is characterized by his dedication to the spiritual growth of his community and the establishment of societies that fostered ongoing discipleship. His life exemplifies the power of the Holy Spirit in transforming lives and communities through faithful preaching.

Transcript

One of the greatest spiritual champions of the last century whom I wish to introduce to my readers in this chapter, is one who is very little known. The man I mean is the Rev. Daniel Rowlands of Llangeitho in Cardiganshire. Thousands of my countrymen, I suspect, have some little acquaintance with Whitefield, Wesley, and Romaine, who never even heard the name of the great apostle of Wales.

That such should be the case need not surprise us. Rowlands was a Welsh clergyman, and seldom preached in the English language. He resided in a very remote part of the Principality, and hardly ever came to London. His ministry was almost entirely among the middle and lower classes in about five counties in Wales. These circumstances alone are enough to account for the fact that so few people know anything about him. Whatever the causes may be there are not many Englishmen who understand Welsh, or can even pronounce the names of the parishes where Rowlands used to preach. In the face of these circumstances, we have no right to be surprised if his reputation has been confined to the land of his nativity.

In addition to all this, we must remember that no biographical account of Rowlands was ever drawn up by his contemporaries. Materials for such an account were got together by one of his sons, and forwarded to

Lady Huntingdon. Her death, unfortunately, immediately afterwards, prevented these materials being used, and what became of them after her death has never been ascertained. The only memoirs of Rowlands are two lives, written by clergymen who are still living. They are both excellent and useful in their way, but of course they labour under the disadvantage of having been drawn up long after the mighty subject of them had passed away.*

These two volumes, and some very valuable information which I have succeeded in obtaining from a kind correspondent in Wales, are the only mines of matter to which I have had access in drawing up this memoir.

Enough, however, and more than enough, is extant, to prove that Daniel Rowlands, in the highest sense, was one of the spiritual giants of the last century. It is a fact that Lady Huntingdon, no mean judge of clergymen, had the highest opinion of Rowlands. Few people had better opportunities of forming a judgment of preachers than she had, and she thought Rowlands was second only to Whitefield. It is a fact that no British preacher of the last century kept together in one district such enormous congregations of souls for fifty years as Rowlands did. It is a fact, above all, that no man a hundred years ago seems to have preached with such unmistakable power of the Holy Ghost accompanying him as Rowlands. These are great isolated facts that cannot be disputed. Like the few scattered bones of extinct mammoths and mastodons, they speak volumes to all who have an ear to hear. They tell us that, in considering and examining Daniel Rowlands, we are dealing with no common man.

Daniel Rowlands was born in the year 1713, at Pant-y-beudy in the parish of Llancwnlle, near Llangeitho, Cardiganshire. He was the second son of the Rev. Daniel Rowlands, rector of Llangeitho, by Jennet, his wife. When a child of three years old, he had a narrow escape of death, like John Wesley. A large stone fell down the chimney on the very spot where he had been sitting two minutes before, which, had he not providentially moved from his place, must have killed him. Nothing else is known of the first twenty years of his life, except the fact that he received his education at Hereford Grammar School, and that he lost his father when he was eighteen years old. It appears, from a tablet in Llangeitho Church, that when Rowlands was born, his father was fifty-four and his mother forty-five years old. His father's removal could not therefore have been a premature event, as he must have attained the ripe age of seventy-two.

From some cause or other, of which we can give no account, Rowlands appears to have gone to no University. His father's death may possibly have made a difference in the circumstances of the family. At any rate, the next fact we hear about him after his father's death, is his ordination in London at the early age of twenty, in the year 1733. He was ordained by letters dimissory from the Bishop of St. David's, and it is recorded, as a curious proof both of his poverty and his earnestness of character, that he went to London on foot.

The title on which Rowlands was ordained was that of curate to his elder brother John, who had succeeded his father, and held the three adjacent livings of Llangeitho, Llancwnlle, and Llandewibrefi. He seems to have entered on his ministerial duties like thousands in his clay--without the slightest adequate sense of his responsibilities, and utterly ignorant of the gospel of Christ. According to Owen he was a good classical scholar, and had made rapid progress at Hereford School in all secular learning. But in the neighbourhood where he was born and began his ministry, he is reported never to have given any proof of fitness to be a minister. He was only known as a man remarkable for natural vivacity, of middle size, of a firm make, of quick and nimble action, very adroit and successful in all games and athletic amusements, and as ready as any one, after doing duty in church on Sunday morning, to spend the rest of God's day in

sports and revels, if not in drunkenness. Such was the character of the great apostle of Wales for some time after his ordination! He was never likely, afterwards, to forget St. Paul's words to the Corinthians, "Such were some of you" (I Cor. VI. II), or to doubt the possibility of any one's conversion.

The precise time and manner of Rowlands' conversion are points involved in much obscurity. According to Morgan, the first thing that awakened him out of his spiritual slumber, was the discovery that, however well he tried to preach, he could not prevent one of his congregations being completely thinned by a dissenting minister named Pugh. It is said that this made him alter his sermons, and adopt a more awakening and alarming style of address. According to Owen, he was first brought to himself by hearing a well-known excellent clergyman, named Griffith Jones, preach at Llandewibrefi. On this occasion his appearance, as he stood in the crowd before the pulpit, is said to have been so full of vanity, conceit, and levity, that Mr. Jones stopped in his sermon and offered a special prayer for him, that God would touch his heart, and make him an instrument for turning souls from darkness to light. This prayer is said to have had an immense effect on Rowlands, and he is reported to have been a different man from that day. I do not attempt to reconcile the two accounts. I can quite believe that both are true. When the Holy Ghost takes in hand the conversion of a soul, he often causes a variety of circumstances to concur and co-operate in producing it. This, I am sure, would be the testimony of all experienced believers. Owen got hold of one set of facts, and Morgan of another. Both happened probably about the same time, and both probably are true.

One thing, at any rate, is very certain. From about the year 1738, when Rowlands was twenty-five, a complete change came over his life and ministry. He began to preach like a man in earnest, and to speak and act like one who had found out that sin, and death, and judgment, and heaven, and hell, were great realities. Gifted beyond most men with bodily and mental qualifications for the work of the pulpit, he began to consecrate himself wholly to it, and threw himself, body, and soul, and mind, into his sermons. The consequence, as might be expected, was an enormous amount of popularity. The churches where he preached were crowded to suffocation. The effect of his ministry, in the way of awakening and arousing sinners, was something tremendous. "The impression," says Morgan, "on the hearts of most people, was that of awe and distress, and as if they saw the end of the world drawing near, and hell ready to swallow them up. His fame soon spread throughout the country, and people came from all parts to hear him. Not only the churches were filled, but also the churchyards. It is said that, under deep conviction, numbers of the people lay down on the ground in the churchyard of Llancwnlle, and it was not easy for a person to pass by without stumbling against some of them."

At this very time, however curious it may seem, it is clear that Rowlands did not preach the full gospel. His testimony was unmistakably truth, but still it was not the whole truth. He painted the spirituality and condemning power of the law in such vivid colours that his hearers trembled before him, and cried out for mercy. But he did not yet lift up Christ crucified in all his fulness, as a refuge, a physician, a redeemer, and a friend; and hence, though many were wounded, they were not healed. How long he continued preaching in this strain it is, at this distance of time, extremely difficult to say. So far as I can make out by comparing dates, it went on for about four years. The work that he did for God in this period, I have no doubt, was exceedingly useful, as a preparation for the message of later days. I, for one, believe that there are places, and times, and seasons, and congregations, in which powerful preaching of the law is of the greatest value. I strongly suspect that many evangelical congregations in the present day would be immensely benefited by a broad, powerful exhibition of God's law. But that there was too much law in Rowlands' preaching for four years after his conversion, both for his own comfort and the good of his hearers, is very

evident from the fragmentary accounts that remain of his ministry.

The means by which the mind of Rowlands was gradually led into the full light of the gospel have not been fully explained by his biographers. Perhaps the simplest explanation will be found in our Lord Jesus Christ's words, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine" (John VII. 17). Rowlands was evidently a man who honestly lived up to his light, and followed on to know the Lord. His Master took care that he did not long walk in darkness, but showed him "the light of life." One principal instrument of guiding him into the whole truth was that same Mr. Pugh who, at an earlier period, had thinned his congregation! He took great interest in Rowlands at this critical era in his spiritual history, and gave him much excellent advice. "Preach the gospel, dear sir," he would say; "preach the gospel to the people, and apply the balm of Gilead, the blood of Christ, to their spiritual wounds, and show the necessity of faith in the crucified Saviour." Happy indeed are young ministers who have an Aquila or Priscilla near them, and when they get good advice are willing to listen to it! The friendship of the eminent layman, Howell Harris, with whom Rowlands became acquainted about this time, was no doubt a great additional help to his soul. In one way or another, the great apostle of Wales was gradually led into the full noontide light of Christ's truth; and about the year 1742, in the thirtieth year of his age, became established as the preacher of a singularly full, free, clear, and well-balanced gospel.

The effect of Rowlands' ministry from this time forward to his life's end was something so vast and prodigious, that it almost takes away one's breath to hear of it. We see unhappily so very little of spiritual influences in the present day, the operations of the Holy Ghost appear confined within such narrow limits and to reach so few persons, that the harvests reaped at Llangeitho a hundred years ago sound almost incredible. But the evidence of the results of his preaching is so abundant and incontestable, that there is no room left for doubt. One universal testimony is borne to the fact that Rowlands was made a blessing to hundreds of souls. People used to flock to hear him preach from every part of the Principality, and to think nothing of travelling fifty or sixty miles for the purpose. On sacrament Sundays it was no uncommon thing for him to have 1500, or 2000, or even 2500 communicants! The people on these occasions would go together in companies, like the Jews going up to the temple feast in Jerusalem, and would return home afterwards singing hymns and psalms on their journey, caring nothing for fatigue.

It is useless to attempt accounting for these effects of the great Welsh preacher's ministry, as many do, by calling them religious excitement. Such people would do well to remember that the influence which Rowlands had over his hearers was an influence which never waned for at least forty-eight years. It had its ebbs and flows, no doubt, and rose on several occasions to the spring-tide of revivals; but at no time did his ministry appear to be without immense and unparalleled results. According to Charles of Bala, and many other unexceptionable witnesses, it seemed just as attractive and effective when he was seventy years old as it was when he was fifty. When we recollect, moreover, the singular fact that on Sundays, at least, Rowlands was very seldom absent from Llangeitho, and that for forty-eight years he was constantly preaching on the same spot, and not, like Whitefield and Wesley, incessantly addressing fresh congregations, we must surely allow that few preachers have had such extraordinary spiritual success since the days of the apostles.

Of course it would be absurd to say that there was no excitement, unsound profession, hypocrisy, and false fire among the thousands who crowded to hear Rowlands. There was much, no doubt, as there always will be, when large masses of people are gathered together. Nothing, perhaps, is so infectious as a kind of sham, sensational Christianity, and particularly among unlearned and ignorant men. The Welsh, too, are notoriously an excitable people. No one, however, was more fully alive to these dangers than the

great preacher himself and no one could warn his hearers more incessantly that the Christianity which was not practical was unprofitable and vain. But, after all, the effects of Rowlands' ministry were too plain and palpable to be mistaken. There is clear and overwhelming evidence that the lives of many of his hearers were vastly improved after hearing him preach, and that sin was checked and distinct knowledge of Christianity increased to an immense extent throughout the Principality.

It will surprise no Christian to hear that, from an early period, Rowlands found it impossible to confine his labours to his own parish. The state of the country was so deplorable as to religion and morality, and the applications he received for help were so many, that he felt he had no choice in the matter. The circumstances under which he first began preaching out of his own neighbourhood are so interesting, as described by Owen, that I shall give his words without abbreviation:

"There was a farmer's wife in Ystradffin, in the county of Carmarthen, who had a sister living near Llangeitho. This woman came at times to see her sister, and on one of these occasions she heard some strange things about the clergyman of the parish--that is, Rowlands. The common saying was, that he was not right in his mind. However, she went to hear him, and not in vain; but she said nothing then to her sister or to anybody else about the sermon, and she returned home to her family. The following Sunday she came again to her sister's home at Llangeitho. 'What is the matter?' said her sister, in great surprise. 'Are your husband and your children well?' She feared, from seeing her again so soon and so unexpectedly, that something unpleasant had happened. 'Oh, yes,' was the reply, 'nothing of that kind is amiss.' Again she asked her, 'what, then, is the matter?' To this she replied, 'I don't well know what is the matter. Something that your cracked clergyman said last Sunday has brought me here to day. It stuck in my mind all the week, and never left me night nor day.' She went again to hear, and continued to come every Sunday, though her road was rough and mountainous, and her home more than twenty miles from Llangeitho.

"After continuing to hear Rowlands about half a year, she felt a strong desire to ask him to come and preach at Ystradffin. She made up her mind to try; and, after service one Sunday, she went to Rowlands, and accosted him in the following manner: 'Sir, if what you say to us is true, there are many in my neighbourhood in a most dangerous condition, going fast to eternal misery. For the sake of their souls, come over, sir, to preach to them.' The woman's request took Rowlands by surprise; but without a moment's hesitation he said, in his usual quick way, 'Yes, I will come, if you can get the clergyman's permission.' This satisfied the woman, and she returned home as much pleased as if she had found some rich treasure. She took the first opportunity of asking her clergyman's permission, and easily succeeded. Next Sunday she went joyfully to Llangeitho, and informed Rowlands of her success. According to his promise he went over and preached at Ystradffin, and his very first sermon there was wonderfully blessed. Not less than thirty persons, it is said, were converted that day. Many of them afterwards came regularly to hear him at Llangeitho."

From this time forth, Rowlands never hesitated to preach outside his own parish, wherever a door of usefulness was opened. When he could, he preached in churches. When churches were closed to him, he would preach in a room, a barn, or the open air. At no period, however, of his ministerial life does he appear to have been so much of an itinerant as some of his contemporaries. He rightly judged that hearers of the gospel required to be built up as well as awakened, and for this work he was peculiarly well qualified. Whatever, therefore, he did on week days, the Sunday generally found him at Llangeitho.

The circumstances under which he first began the practice of field-preaching were no less remarkable than those under which he was called to preach at Ystradffin. It appears that after his own conversion he felt great anxiety about the spiritual condition of his old companions in sin and folly. Most of them were thoughtless headstrong young men, who thoroughly disliked his searching sermons, and refused at last to come to church at all. "Their custom," says Owen, "was to go on Sunday to a suitable place on one of the hills above Llangeitho, and there amuse themselves with sports and games." Rowlands tried all means to stop this sinful profanation of the Lord's day, but for some time utterly failed. At last he determined to go there himself on a Sunday. As these rebels against God would not come to him in church, he resolved to go to them on their own ground. He went therefore, and suddenly breaking into the ring as a cockfight was going on, addressed them powerfully and boldly about the sinfulness of their conduct. The effect was so great that not a tongue was raised to answer or oppose him, and from that day the Sabbath assembly in that place was completely given up. For the rest of his life Rowlands never hesitated, when occasion required, to preach in the open air.

The extra-parochial work that Rowlands did by his itinerant preaching was carefully followed up and not allowed to fall to the ground. No one understood better than he did, that souls require almost as much attention after they are awakened as they do before, and that in spiritual husbandry there is need of watering as well as planting. Aided, therefore, by a few zealous fellow-labourers, both lay and clerical, he established a regular system of Societies, on John Wesley's plan, over the greater part of Wales, through which he managed to keep up a constant communication with all who valued the gospel that he preached, and to keep them well together. These societies were all connected with one great Association, which met four times a-year, and of which he was generally the moderator. The amount of his influence at these Association-meetings may be measured by the fact that above one hundred ministers in the Principality regarded him as their spiritual father! From the very first this Association seems to have been a most wisely organized and useful institution, and to it may be traced the existence of the Calvinistic Methodist body in Wales at this very day.

The mighty instrument whom God employed in doing all the good works I have been describing, was not permitted to do them without many trials. For wise and good ends, no doubt - to keep him humble in the midst of his immense success and to prevent his being exalted overmuch--he was called upon to drink many bitter cups. Like his divine Master, he was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." The greatest of these trials, no doubt, was his ejection from the Church of England in 1763, after serving her faithfully for next to nothing as an ordained clergyman for thirty years. The manner in which this disgraceful transaction was accomplished was so remarkable, that it deserves to be fully described.

Rowlands, it must be remembered, was never an incumbent. From the time of his ordination in 1733, he was simply curate of Llangeitho, under his elder brother John, until the time of his death in 1760. What kind of a clergyman his elder brother was is not very clear. He was drowned at Aberystwith, and we only know that for twenty-seven years he seems to have left everything at Llangeitho in Daniel's hands, and to have let him do just what he liked. Upon the death of John Rowlands, the Bishop of St. David's, who was patron of Llangeitho, was asked to give the living to his brother Daniel, upon the very reasonable ground that he had been serving the parish as curate no less than twenty-seven years. The bishop unhappily refused to comply with this request, alleging as his excuse that he had received many complaints about his irregularities. He took the very singular step of giving the living to John, the son of Daniel Rowlands, a young man twenty-seven years old. The result of this very odd proceeding was, that Daniel Rowlands became curate to his own son, as he had been curate to his own brother, and continued his labours at

Llangeitho for three years more uninterruptedly.**

The reasons why the Bishop of St. David's refused to give Rowlands the living of Llangeitho may be easily divined. So long as he was only a curate, he knew that he could easily silence him. Once instituted and inducted as incumbent, he would have occupied a position from which he could not have been removed without much difficulty. Influenced, probably, by some such considerations, the bishop permitted Rowlands to continue preaching at Llangeitho as curate to his son, warning him at the same time that the Welsh clergy were constantly complaining of his irregularities, and that he could not long look over them. These "irregularities," be it remembered, were neither drunkenness, breach of the seventh commandment, hunting, shooting, nor gambling! The whole substance of his offence was preaching out of his own parish wherever he could get hearers. To the bishop's threats Rowlands replied, "that he had nothing in view but the glory of God in the salvation of sinners, and that as his labours had been so much blessed he could not desist."

At length, in the year 1763, the fatal step was taken. The bishop sent Rowlands a mandate, revoking his license, and was actually foolish enough to have it served on a Sunday! The niece of an eye-witness describes what happened in the following words "My uncle was at Llangeitho church that very morning. A stranger came forward and served Mr. Rowlands with a notice from the bishop, at the very time when he was stepping into the pulpit. Mr. Rowlands read it, and told the people that the letter which he had just received was 'from the bishop, revoking his license. Mr. Rowlands then said, 'We must obey the higher powers. Let me beg you will go out quietly, and then we shall conclude the service of the morning by the church gate.' And so they walked out, weeping and crying. My uncle thought there was not a dry eye in the church at the moment. Mr. Rowlands accordingly preached outside the church with extraordinary effect."

A more unhappy, ill-timed, blundering exercise of Episcopal power than this, it is literally impossible to conceive! Here was a man of singular gifts and graces, who had no objection to anything in the Articles or Prayer-book, cast out of the Church of England for no other fault than excess of zeal. And this ejection took place at a time when scores of Welsh clergymen were shamefully neglecting their duties, and too often were drunkards, gamblers, and sportsmen, if not worse! That the bishop afterwards bitterly repented of what he did, is very poor consolation indeed. It was too late. The deed was done. Rowlands was shut out of the Church of England, and an immense number of his people all over Wales followed him. A breach 'was made in the walls of the Established Church which will probably never be healed. As long as the world stands, the Church of England in Wales will never get over the injury done to it by the preposterous and stupid revocation of Daniel Rowlands' license.

There is every reason to believe that Rowlands felt his expulsion most keenly. However, it made no difference whatever in his line of action. His friends and followers soon built him a large and commodious chapel in the parish of Llangeitho, and migrated there in a body. He did not even leave Llangeitho rectory; for his son, being rector, allowed him to reside there as long as he lived. In fact, the Church of England lost everything by ejecting him, and gained nothing at all. The great Welsh preacher was never silenced practically for a single day, and the Church of England only reaped a harvest of odium and dislike in Wales, which is bearing fruit to this very hour.

From the time of his ejection to his death, the course of Rowlands' life seems to have been comparatively undisturbed. No longer persecuted and snubbed by ecclesiastical superiors, he held on his way for twenty-seven years in great quietness, undiminished popularity, and immense usefulness, and died at length in Llangeitho rectory on October the 16th, 1790, at the ripe old age of seventy-seven.

"He was unwell during the last year of his life," says Morgan, "but able to go on with his ministry at Llangeitho, though he scarcely went anywhere else. It was his particular wish that he might go direct from his work to his everlasting rest, and not be kept long on a death-bed. His heavenly Father was pleased to grant his desire, and when his departure was drawing nigh, he had some pleasing idea of his approaching end."

One of his children has supplied the following interesting account of his last days:

"My father made the following observations in his sermons two Sundays before his departure. He said, 'I am almost leaving, and am on the point of being taken from you. I am not tired of work, but in it. I have some presentiment that my heavenly Father will soon release me from my labours, and bring me to my everlasting rest But I hope that he will continue his gracious presence with you after I am gone.' He told us, conversing on his departure after worship the last Sunday, that he should like to die in a quiet, serene manner, and hoped that he should not be disturbed by our sighs and crying. He added, 'I have no more to state, by way of acceptance with God, than I have always stated: I die as a poor sinner, depending fully and entirely on the merits of a crucified Saviour for my acceptance with God.' In his last hours he often used the expression, in Latin, which Wesley used on his death-bed, 'God is with us;' and finally departed in great peace."

Rowlands was buried at Llangeitho, at the east end of the church. His enemies could shut him out of the pulpit, but not out of the churchyard. An old inhabitant of the parish, now eighty-five years of age, says: "I well remember his tomb, and many times have I read the inscription, his name, and age, with that of his wife's, Eleanor, who died a year and two months after her husband. The stone was laid on a three feet wall, but it is now worn out by the hand of time."

Rowlands was once married. It is believed that his wife was the daughter of Mr. Davies of Glynwchaf near Llangeitho. He had seven children who survived him, and two who died in infancy. What became of all his family, and whether there are any lineal descendants of his, I have been unable to ascertain with accuracy.

The engraving of him which faces the title-page of the lives drawn up by Morgan and Owen, gives one the idea of Rowlands being a grave and solemn-looking man. It is probably taken from the picture of him, which Lady Huntingdon sent an artist to take at the very end of his life. The worthy old saint did not at all like having his portrait taken. "Why do you object, sir?" said the artist at last. "Why?" replied the old man, with great emphasis; "I am only a bit of clay like thyself" And then he exclaimed, "Alas! alas! alas! Taking the picture of a poor old sinner! alas! alas!" "His countenance" says Morgan, "altered and fell at once, and this is the reason why the picture appears so heavy and cast down."

I have other things yet to tell about Rowlands. His preaching and the many characteristic anecdotes about him deserve special notice. But I must reserve these points for another chapter.

*The memoirs of Rowlands to which I refer are two small volumes by the Rev. John Owen, Rector of Tbrussington, and the Rev. E. Morgan, Vicar of Syston, both in the county of Leicester. The private information which I have received has been supplied by a relative of the great Welsh apostle, though not in lineal descent, the Rev. William Row lands of Fishguard, South Wales. Some few facts, it may be interesting to my readers to know, come from an old man of eighty-five, who, when a boy, heard Rowlands preach.

** For a clue to all this intricacy, I am entirely indebted to the Rev. W. Rowlands of Fishguard. Unless the facts I have detailed are carefully remembered, it is impossible to understand how Daniel Rowlands was so easily turned out of his position. The truth is that he was only a curate.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-ryle/daniel-rowlands-part-1/>

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