

Joseph Barnes Watson

by John Bjorlie

The sermon tells the story of Joseph Barnes Watson's life, from his early days in Cumberland, England, to his conversion, ministry, and legacy as a devoted family man and prolific writer and editor.

Scripture: Genesis 5:24, Joshua 1:9, Psalm 126:5, Proverbs 27:8, Mark 16:15, John 20:31, Philippians 3:14, 2 Timothy 4:7, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Evangelism", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

Joseph Barnes Watson, a preacher from Cumberland, England, was deeply influenced by his parents' contrasting personalities and the simple, sincere gatherings of believers. His encounters with Scripture and the direct communication of truth shaped his fervent preaching style. Despite excelling in various fields, a faithful old warrior pointed him to John 20:31, leading to his spiritual transformation. Watson's commitment to the gospel and his emphasis on active evangelism and solid congregational work left a lasting impact on those around him.

Transcript

Joseph Barnes Watson (1884-1955) came from the sheep-herding hills and marshy flats of Cumberland, England. There, in the village of Wigton, the gospel entered the home of John and Jane Watson. Their marriage was another proof that opposites attract. Jane was a calm, cautious homemaker, while John had a heavy dose of that impetuous, loud, jovial impulse that kept village life interesting. John left school for work when only nine years old, and only in adulthood learned how to read from his wife. But those disadvantages did not slow his fervor. Preaching in cottages and in the market place, he helped the local chapter of the Y.M.C.A. (which at that time was an aggressive evangelistic organization), and also joined hands with a simple gathering of believers.

After Wigton, the young family moved to Workington, where John and Jane Watson joined themselves to an assembly. There, the curious young Joseph observed God's people gathering in simple New Testament fashion.

Speaking about those hallowed sessions spent around the simple memorials of our Lord's death, Watson later said, "These are minutes when the soul realizes the presence of the Lord in a measure beyond all other hours. Then it is that the love of Christ melts our hearts and causes our eyes to overflow. Then it is that we look at the Man of Calvary. Then it is that we stoop to kiss the Conqueror's feet. Then it is that we see afresh the wounded hands, feet, and side, and say with Thomas, 'My Lord and my God!'"

It was not the sophistication of the surroundings or the attendees that left such impressions. The saints were respectful, but not ornate. There were no multimedia special effects to induce an attitude of worship. But as a musical Scottish tongue raised the hymn, and the congregation joined in, the honest observer could only say that those people said and sang truths which they personally had seen and heard.

Another lasting impression on young Joseph was the direct approach in communicating Scripture. As in military life, the maxim is: "an order that can be misunderstood will be." So, in telling the truths of God, J. B. Watson did not allow his hearers any loopholes. His father dreaded the obscure sermon. Once in a Bible study, after a tedious discussion of a single verse, John felt that the study was less than unfruitful and quietly suggested that they move on to the next verse. "But John," one of the learned brethren protested, "we've not exhausted this one yet."

"Nay," answered John, "But thoo's exhausted me."

Those youthful impressions were strong. But people do not enter into the kingdom of God on impressions. Joseph was climbing his way up the academic ladder, excelling in the physical sciences, showing a deft hand as an illustrator, and then in the off hours achieving some local reknown in the Workington Cricket Club as a promising left-handed batsman. Still, between his athletics and temporal attainments, the nineteen-year-old attended a Sunday School where a faithful old warrior named Jacob Dixon trained his crosshairs on the wavering young man. Jacob tracked his prey down at John Watson's workshop in Workington in April of 1903. There he pointed Joseph to John 20:31 , "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." It was a bullseye.

Brother Dixon was not like Mephibosheth's nurse who dropped the child. In the years that followed, before and after Joseph's move to London in 1905, brother Dixon had a dominant influence. Dixon was the tutor who showed him the practices of a consistent Christian life.

After Joseph moved to London to become a Government clerk in the customs office, he kept a careful diary. "Jos. B. Watson, born:--September 26th, 1884--Born again, April 25th, 1903," he wrote, then at the head of the first page, in his tidy writing style:

"Day by day the manna fell"

Diary of Scriptural Studies, Spiritual Thoughts, and Gospel Outlines, 1905.

Motto for the year:--"Enoch walked with God"

(Gen. 5:24)

Joseph's spiritual progress is outlined in this journal. Though not without initial crisis in his Christian life, the studious young man at the clerk's desk was himself a warrior in the making. He reminds us of Dwight Eisenhower, who, before World War II worked on the staff of General Douglas MacArthur. Steadily rising in the ranks, as we know, Eisenhower went on to command the allied invasion of Europe. General MacArthur was visibly miffed that he had been passed up for that job, and derisively said that Eisenhower was "the best clerk I ever had." But Eisenhower was unable to take this as a complement, and retorted that under MacArthur he "had studied theatrics."

Joseph saw God's hand in his daily employment, and by night either went out to preach himself, listened to Bible teaching, or studied in private.

To the end, J. B. Watson maintained a keen interest in the gospel, and complained about those who seemed satisfied to hold polite, but poorly attended, gospel meetings. In his July 31 journal entry for 1905, Watson wrote: "Every assembly should be a center from which radiates an active living testimony to the saving power of Christ...The snug gospel meetings where we sing pretty hymns and listen to a popular preacher from a distance have none of the true ring of testimonies for Christ. We get much too narrowed into ourselves and our own comforts, we forget too often in our own safety that all around us are thousands--teeming thousands--going heedless to endless woe...We need to bestir ourselves and no longer sit in our comfortable seats, praying God to condone our laziness by sending sinners in to the message, but be up and with holy zeal carry out the message of life to the sinner. What saith the Scripture? 'Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.' 'Go ye into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in.' 'Go, work in My vineyard.' 'He that goeth forth, and weepeth, bearing precious seed shall doubtless come again rejoicing.' 'A sower went forth to sow.'"

Within a few years, he was well-known in London as an effective preacher. His biographer, Robert Rendall, said of his ministry, "A flowing river cuts out a bed for itself." By 1908, his gift as a Bible teacher was becoming evident. That year he gave a lecture series on the difficult topic of "the Levitical Offerings."

In 1910, Joseph Watson was joined in marriage to Miss Caroline Jeffery. Their home was a proof that the church still has its Priscillas and Aquilas, and their natural children (two sons and two daughters) were also among their numerous spiritual children.

The Watsons settled on the east side of London, and in 1911, Watson joined hands with two other able workers in an evangelistic work in Leytonstone. Leyton had been the work place of such notables as Lord Radstock, William Groves (known as "Happy Bill") and Gipsy Smith. About thirty believers from area assemblies joined together and began meeting at Green Grove Hall. Robert Rendal writes about the assembly that was raised up there: "In ten years the company had increased to some 114 persons in regular fellowship. Although he had many openings for ministry in other London districts--which he filled as occasion offered--he firmly believed that those who ministeed the Word in what he used to call a peripatetic ministry should do some solid work in their own assembly, as this would keep their ministry in touch with reality. He not only believed this, but practiced it, and so came to learn from personal experience the problems and joys that are associated with the congregational life of a local church."

A close co-laborer of forty years in the work said that Watson felt his first duty to the assembly at Leytonstone, then to the greater London area, and then to a wider sphere. Evidently he had seen more than one roving expert who reminded him of Solomon's proverb: "As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place" (Prov. 27:8).

Eventually Watson would travel as far as Africa in his teaching ministry, but he remained like the skylark of Wordsworth's poem,

That soar but never roam,

True to the kindred points of heaven and home.

In the work at Leytonstone, he was often called on as a conciliator. One journal entry says, "Assembly mending. We were helped in bringing the differing parties to one mind. Got home at 1 a.m." How difficult it was for a preacher like Watson to hold his tongue we can only imagine. If he had wanted to, he could sharpen his tongue to a keen razor edge and then cut a man to ribbons with it. Once, at the London docks, he saw a cruel man abusing a carriage horse. He intervened to apply what the English call "a proper dressing down." After Watson had put his verbal rapier back in the scabbard, the driver stood motionless with his whip hanging limp at his side and exclaimed, "Lor', guv'nor, and yer ain't used one swear word!"

Watson was an intense man, with fiery eyes. But this incident with the horse driver was not his normal mode of expression.

When John R. Watson wrote about his late father, his language is so effusive that we have to wonder if such a man could have ever lived in this century. Every one of us can pray that we will so live Christ before our spouses and children that they will feel the same way about us. J. B. Watson was the hero of his home, who set aside his Saturday afternoons for his family. He lived a busy life; at his prime he was speaking 200 times a year, besides working five and a half days a week as a customs officer, and an early riser besides. But he was not too busy to play a prank on his youngsters, inspect their school work, or teach them a poem. When he prepared to preach, he would sometimes consult his youthful board of advisers, and then at the preaching place his delighted children would hear their father insert into his message the very words of advice given him from his children. No one else in the auditorium would know why the speaker would flash a smile just at that point.

But every message he preached was not a sensation. As his journal entry for January 8, 1925, reads, "Late through train delay: spoke on 1 Samuel 7. A poor affair. I was 'off' after the rush from train to meeting. On reaching home conducted the funeral of the domestic cat--a sad day!"

Watson continued to work in customs right through the difficult and stressful years of the war. In the evenings, he would move about the dangerous streets on his pastoral errands. Then in November of 1945, after 40 years and nine months as a civil servant, Watson retired.

Watson's enduring contribution to us is his writing and editorial work with The Witness magazine. In the 1870s, Donald Ross began a magazine which became The Witness. J. R. Caldwell was the next editor who made it a recognized forum for sound teaching. After him, Henry Pickering took it on, and in 1941, Pickering passed on the editorship to J. B. Watson with the advice, "When considering articles, remember those rows of miners' cottages!" For instance, he was the editor of the excellent The Church--A Symposium of Principles and Practice, which includes articles by other able men such as W. E. Vine. But Watson was first a preacher, and secondarily a scribe. Watson's speaking is reflected in his writing--direct, clear, and giving great attention to the details of Scripture. Whether speaking in the open air at Hyde Park, or addressing 2,000 in the Spurgeon Tabernacle at the Sunday School Teacher's Convention, he was consistently on the mark. One friend said, "His addresses, brilliant models of the preacher's craft, were delicately chiselled in thought and phrase. Not for him the slipshod preparation of heart and mind."

In the months before his homegoing, Watson's health curtailed his preaching. Writing to a friend, he confided that this was a great trial. "Rutherford wrote in the time of his imprisonment of the trial of his 'Dumb Sabbaths': I am tasting the same experience. I think of myself as like the priest Zachariah, dumb but still able to use the writing tablet.

"I know that trials work for ends too high for sense to trace,

That oft in dark attire He sends His ministers of grace."

Watson's long friend, Ransome Cooper, visited him in the hospital and heard his last words. Ransome was reading to him about the translation of Mr. Valiant-for-Truth in the Pilgrim's Progress. "I read out slowly and distinctly the words, 'Ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you.' Feebly but clearly he repeated, 'Not one thing hath failed.' Then I read from Bunyan, from the paper marking the verse, 'I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am.'

"So I left him: but the memory remained with me of the triumphant words that follow in that little extract from Bunyan: 'My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles Who now will be my Rewarder...So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.'"

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