

Thomas Walsh of Limerick

by Keith Malcomson

The sermon explores the life and ministry of Thomas Walsh, a key figure in the early Methodist movement in Ireland, highlighting his conversion, challenges, and lasting impact.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28, Acts 20:24, Romans 3:28, 2 Timothy 4:7, 1 Peter 4:14

Topics: "Persevering Faith", "Evangelism"

Description

Keith Malcomson shares the inspiring story of Thomas Walsh, a young Irishman who, after a powerful conversion experience, dedicated his life to preaching the Gospel amidst great opposition and persecution. Despite facing threats, attacks, and illness, Walsh fervently spread the message of salvation, leading many to Christ and establishing Methodist societies across Ireland. His deep love for God, commitment to study, and unwavering faith in the face of adversity serve as a powerful example of selfless dedication to the Kingdom of God.

Transcript

As a result of a great storm at sea in 1738, George Whitefield returning from America to England, was put ashore at county Clare. This opened an effectual door for him to preach at Limerick and then in Dublin. Then in 1747 the first Methodist preacher Thomas Williams was officially sent to the shores of Ireland. So great was the expectation of God working and so great the burden for Ireland's salvation that Williams convinced John Wesley to make his first visit to Ireland before the end of that year.

Over the next forty years Wesley made another twenty preaching trips to the Emerald Isle totalling about six years. This revival movement which had so impacted Britain was now seeking to gather a harvest of souls out of Ireland. Interestingly, of the first four Methodists at Oxford, one was an Irishman from Dublin and the connection of Methodism with Ireland would continue for many years. Wesley once said "have patience and Ireland will repay you."

In 1749 Mr. Robert Swindell, one of John Wesley's zealous Evangelist's in Ireland, had one of his meetings invaded by a bunch of rough Highland soldiers who had planned to drag him from the pulpit and to beat him to death, or at least to a point from which he would never fully recover. However, the convicting power of God fell upon the soldiers and the worst man of the lot was stopped in his tracks and mightily converted before all present!

These same soldiers were later, in the providence of God, stationed at Limerick when the same Mr. Swindell was on his way to Cork but stopped off in Limerick to preach on St. Patrick's day. As crowds made their way from Mass he stood and boldly proclaimed the Gospel on the streets. His preaching stirred up a life-threatening and angry mob but the Highland soldiers intervened and just barely saved him. Swindell preached later again that day to a great crowd and out of this one day's preaching a gathering of believers was raised up in the city of Limerick. More specifically, in the crowd that day stood an earnest young man upon whom deep conviction of sin had weighed for some time.

Thomas Walsh

The young man was Thomas Walsh, a 19 year-old youth from Ballylin, in the Parish of Croagh. That day he listened to the words preached from Matt. 12:28 "Come unto me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." As he listened, he was deeply moved. In personal conversation with Swindell Thomas was convinced as to the truth of God's Word.

Young Thomas was born in Limerick in 1730 in a staunchly Catholic home. He was raised and taught that all those outside the Church of Rome were heretics destined for eternal damnation. When he thought about the day of judgement he trembled with fear. He was utterly ignorant of God's truth but carried on in prayers to saints and angels. Although trying to follow a religious and devout form he still found pride, anger, self-will, revenge, evil speaking, lying and other sins holding great power in his heart, mind and actions.

The first ray of light that came to him was when his brother who had been training for the priesthood resigned his studies as a result of closely studying the written scriptures. Every question he asked his brother was answered by a verse from the Bible. Thomas took to reading the Bible and soon realised the error of his religion, his need of forgiveness through the Blood and his own need of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Later that year in the month of September, young Thomas joined himself to a Methodist class meeting in Newmarket with the hope of finding true salvation. He went through a prolonged wrestling in his search for true salvation and forgiveness. After four long months while in attendance at one of the meetings, the power of salvation broke upon him and he was born again of the Spirit of God amidst the prayers and the singing of the saints.

It was here that he experienced real power and love in true Christian fellowship. In this gathering there was great joy, it was Heaven on earth. One Methodist Circuit rider would later say it was difficult to proceed preaching to these gathered believers as his voice was drowned out by their prayers and praise.

Young Thomas was soon ridiculed by both Catholics and Protestants. They called him a hypocrite, mad, deceived and worse but he simply pressed on in Christ desiring to be taught more concerning Christ by the Holy Spirit. He said at this time "I desired to be ever in the school of Christ, learning the lessons of His grace."

A quick work was done in this young man's heart and God began to raise him up to preach the Gospel. He could see in this new move of God in the land all the marks of the early Apostolic Church of the New Testament, and so gave himself to study in order to help forward this work.

Beside his own Irish language he mastered English, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He had such success in his studies that he truly believed he was being divinely helped and prepared for future ministry. While studying he frequently broke forth into praise unto God for His great goodness and mercy.

It was not long until he was able to talk with John Wesley personally. Mr Wesley was on a three month tour of Ireland and Thomas asked him concerning the call of God he believed was on his life. Mr Wesley asked him to send a written testimony of his conversion and spiritual experience to him for consideration. In response to this information Mr Wesley returned the following advice in a note.

"My Dear Brother, It is hard to judge what God has called you to till trial is made. Therefore, when you have an opportunity, you may go to Shronil, and spend two or three days with the people there. Speak to them in Irish."

Along with a friend he walked thirty miles to his first preaching appointment at Shronell. Here a large congregation gathered in a barn and he preached from Romans 3:28 "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

As he continued to preach for the next few days, some mocked and others turned to the Lord. His calling was sealed by the conversion of sinners. Feeling the burning call of God he gave himself unto the ministry of the Gospel. From then on he preached twice every day at Limerick with great power. Souls who heard him began to come under deep conviction of sin and as a result got saved.

Next, leaving his work as a schoolteacher in Limerick, he travelled through other parts of the south of Ireland, often travelling great distances. By now there was a little harvest gathered in scattered places which he helped, encouraged and strengthened. He had a great love and burden for preaching in the open-air which he did two and three times a day and he had great success in opening up new areas. Multitudes from all denominations would come to hear him preach. In country towns many would stop to listen to him out of curiosity, but soon were found weeping their way to Christ. The poor would literally drop to their knees and cry out for the mercy of God. He could turn anyplace into a pulpit. He preached on "mountains and highways, in meadows, private houses, prisons and ships."

The priests and other enemies of the Gospel were outraged at his success and influence and so began to spread false reports and rumours about him. This did not work, so mobs were stirred up against him. Frequently he was attacked with sticks and stones; even whilst preaching he would have to run for his life from a stone-throwing mob.

One such time in January 1752, when travelling to Roscrea, just a mile from the town, a group of men armed with sticks and stones who had taken an oath to harm him, took him captive. They brought both a Catholic and Protestant priest out of the town in the hopes of turning him to either, just as long as he rejected Methodism.

After confounding all their comments with his wise responses they promised to let him go as long as he never returned to Roscrea, to which he responded that he would rather choose martyrdom than do that. They then took him into the town and threatened to throw him down a well if he didn't promise that he would not return. Again he refused.

As part of the crowd cried out for him to get thrown down the well and others called for his release a local minister came to his aid and escorted him away to safety. Shortly after this however, on the same day, he

made his way out on to the street amidst the market crowd and boldly lifted his voice in proclaiming the Gospel.

He was quickly seized by the crowd and violently thrown out of the town. As he mounted his horse he bowed his head and raised his voice in prayer to God. Unmoved by opposition he again returned at later times to this town where some believed and formed a new Wesleyan Society.

By 1752 he was one of only nine itinerant Methodist preachers in the land. Mr. Wesley paid a long visit to Ireland that year arriving in Limerick on August 13th, to hold the first Methodist Leaders Conference in Ireland.

In conference it was decided that unless a man could preach twice a day he ought to remain a local preacher as opposed to an itinerant. The whole of Ireland was then split into six circuits which were designated Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Athlone, Wexford and the North. Each circuit would take a preacher about three months to travel.

Walsh was given four areas, Dublin and Cork in the East and South, Limerick in the West, and in the North those counties around Belfast. Walsh then traveled with Mr. Wesley preaching side by side to large gatherings across the country.

In May 1754 Thomas attended the main Methodist conference in London. Whilst there he lifted his voice in the open air and preached to great crowds of his own countrymen in their own language. Then a week later at the famous Moorfields he preached to a great host both in Irish and English that by all means he might gain some.

It was at this stage that John Wesley said of him that he did not know any preacher who in so few years was the instrument of converting so many sinners from the error of their ways. This was very high commendation from such a great Evangelist in this early Methodist movement.

He also said of him "Such a master of Biblical knowledge I never saw before, and never expect to see again." He believed that with six men such as Walsh he could turn England upside down.

Walsh returned from London to Cork where he had a good hearing from great crowds of Catholics who gladly heard him even though the priests did all in their power to hinder this. All opposition was to no avail; Walsh was fervent in his labours, prayers, and tears in seeing men turn to Christ.

One day when journeying from Cork to Bandon he entered into conversation with a man until the point of opening up the Gospel to him. The man suddenly broke forth into a religious rage threatening to kill Walsh that very moment for the 'deceits' he preached. Walsh replied to the man in Irish which shocked him and stopped him in his tracks. The Gospel was given to him in his own tongue and the man went away broken and contrite.

While travelling on the Limerick circuit Walsh fell seriously ill. When writing to Wesley at this time he said, "I find, as it were, an infinite desire to preach the Gospel, and if I could, to set the nation on fire. But the providence of God keeps me weak, and often visits me with afflictions of body. I do not murmur, neither do I count my life dear unto myself..."

At the same time a number of the other itinerant preachers were laid aside by illness through the great labour they were undertaking. The weather, oppositions and amount of constant travel and labour took its

toll on these men's bodies but worked for good in the plan of God as it caused other young, holy, zealous and faithful men to be called out into the ministry.

Last Days

In 1756 during Wesley's first visit to the North, Walsh visited Newtownards where he set out to preach in the open air. While opening in pray a man called Mortimer accompanied by a mob caught hold of him and dragged him through the streets. With some help he broke free from them and then made another attempt to preach but again he was attacked by this mob and had to run for his life. This escape forced him to run through the fields to the mountains causing him to get thoroughly soaked.

This incident was attributed to his soon fatal illness. The same Mortimer followed him next to Lisburn in the hope to stir up the same trouble for him there, but a butcher with a sharp knife came to his rescue and the 'would be' persecutor very soon left town.

When Wesley saw Walsh in 1758 he said of him that he was alive but only just. He carried all the symptoms of consumption of which he was in the last stage and beyond human help. In earlier days when urged to 'take things easy' all he could say was "the sword is too sharp for the scabbard." Though he was not yet thirty he had the looks of a man in his fifties. He had literally worn out his body in abundant labours not to mention his mind.

Frequently he would be up late studying and then up at four in the morning as normal to seek God. Again when challenged by someone to slow down and get more sleep his reply was, "Should a man rob God?" When looking at his life self-denial was both seen and heard. Throughout these years his sermons were rarely less than an hour and were as loud as they were long.

For a time, very sick he returned to the place of his birth to be nursed by family and friends. Then by request he was moved to Dublin where he stayed in a room over the Methodist Chapel. It was here that he fell into a terrible mental and physical conflict of great darkness which was almost too much for him. But just before the end the Lord came to him; the battle broke from off him and he cried out "He is come! He is come! My beloved is mine, and I am His; His for ever;" and with that he went into the presence of His Master.

Multitudes who had experienced the power and joy of salvation owed much to this young Apostle of Ireland who after only nine years as a Christian went to his reward aged just twenty eight. The godly John Fletcher of Medley said his death was a "heavy loss" to the Methodist cause and to Christ's kingdom. May God raise up more Thomas Walsh's in this day!

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