

## 2. Evan Roberts

by Robert Ellis

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*The sermon explores the life and legacy of Evan Roberts, emphasizing his role in the Welsh revival and the importance of spiritual commitment and prayer.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:11, Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 12:7, Hebrews 12:1

**Topics:** "Spiritual Revival", "Prayer Life"

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### Description

Robert Ellis delivers a sermon reflecting on the life of Evan Roberts, a vessel in God's hand during the 1904-5 revival, who endured physical and spiritual strains for the sake of God's work. The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the sacrifices and dedication of revivalists like Evan Roberts, who spent years in prayer and communion with God, bringing light and transformation to many lives. It calls for a return to seeking God's presence and the examples of past spiritual giants like Evan Roberts to revitalize the spiritual life of the church in times of low spiritual fervor.

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### Transcript

A GENTLEMAN sits alone in his room, sociable to a degree. In years he is beyond the span of the Biblical promise of "three score years and ten." The mail has arrived containing a letter and a money gift from across the Atlantic, as a small token for a great blessing the donor had received by the conversion of his father in the 1904-5 revival. The elderly gentleman "maketh no parade" of these tokens (which are many). They still come as echoes of the great power that swept the principality when God in His chariot, of grace visited His people and many were lifted from a life of sin and shame to a life of holiness and service.

That is a picture of the last days of Evan Roberts, who, to a degree, suffered until the end in his nervous system from the terrible strain of being a vessel in God's hand half a century ago. Does the church realise the tremendous physical taxation of the heaven-sent revivalist? Not merely the incessant travelling through Wales and addressing vast congregations but the heavier taxation of living "in the Presence," the long sessions of prayer and communion with the Unseen, the intercession for others? Does this not take its physical toll? Paul was translated into the third heaven and there experienced things inexplicable, and forthwith speaks of "the thorn in the flesh." Was it the physical result of that spiritual elation? Even physically we ought to understand the meaning of the years of solitude of Mr. Evan Roberts, and his apparent aloofness. We thank God for His servant and that he should have experienced the divine promise--"There shall be light at eventide." He, through God's spirit, brought light into thousands of lives, and today when the spiritual life of the church is at a low ebb, it is kept from becoming stagnant by the

remnant who still testify to the power of God's grace in 1904. Evan Roberts is more or less a name to the present generation, and 1904-5 something peculiar that happened to their forefathers. As the athlete goes back a few yards in order to take his jump, so it is in the experience of the church. Forward looking unto Jesus is our motto.

That is our imperative duty. Yet we have to retrace our steps to have a vision of the cloud of witnesses. In the Welsh solo "Plas Gogerddan" (Palace of Gogerddan), the young aspirant is advised to pay an occasional visit to the room where the paintings of his ancestors adorn the walls and there from receive inspiration to carry on. Those to whom Evan Roberts is a mere name we invite on a pilgrimage to the past to find out how God called and equipped him for his tremendous task.

Evan Roberts' childhood and youth were spent in the typical atmosphere of the latter part of the 19th century, "true to the kindred points of" chapel and home, with no secular attraction, and no youth movements, for chapel and home were one. The childhood days of his family were spent in the period when the prayer meeting and the Young People's Guild were servants of the same Master, and intellectual and spiritual development went hand in hand. The Glamorgan of those days was not Anglicised to the extent it is today; hence the influence of culture and religion, and especially Welsh culture. Few and far between today are the people who take an intelligent delight in the literary traditions of Glamorgan. Something tragic has happened since the days when the Welsh poet Griffith Llwyd (1380-1410) in his "cywydd" (strict metrical poetry) "Danfon yr haul Forganwg" ("Sending the sun to Glamorgan"), which stretched from Monmouthshire to Glyn Neath, felt jealous, of the sun, so honoured by being above Glamorgan, the home of poesy, Welsh culture, and hospitality: --

"Gor off blaned a garaf

Gwyn dy fyd ar hyd yr haf,

Dy fod uwch, lle difai dydd,

Ben holl Forgannwg beunydd.

Dinag bobl doniog bybyr

O dir Gwent lle mae da'r gwyr,

Hyd, lle medry ehedeg,

Glyn Nedd, bro teyrnedd teg."

The anglicising and industrialising of Glamorgan during the last century has to a degree destroyed Welsh culture, that ear for music, in sound and words. Iolo Morgannwg, Islwyn, Dewi Esyllt, and Carnelian are but names (if as much) to the average man of the Glamorgan of today. But during the last quarter of the nineteenth century there still lingered that tradition sponsored by the chapel, and eminent poets like Islwyn, Ceiriog, Hwfa Mon, Cadfan, Berw, and Dyfed were heroes of the cultural life of Wales during that period. Evan Roberts in his youth did not waste the substance of his life, neither intellectually nor morally. He was a product of the prayer meeting the seiat and the literary society. He delved into the realm of Welsh poetry and literature, and instrumental music became a happy hunting ground for him He possessed fine intellectual power. The background of his life was essentially religious. His father, Henry Roberts, a pitman by vocation, was remarkable for his scriptural knowledge. The incident related by his

brother James substantiates our statement. The brothers were working together twelve hours a day, two hours being allowed for lunch. Henry spent most of the time memorising the Bible. One week especially he disturbed his brother James with this learning by heart of the Bible, especially during the night. After going to bed he spent hours reciting Bible verses and James, trying to sleep, said--"Henry be quiet, let me sleep and then carry on." During that week Henry Roberts learnt 144 verses. Being a staunch supporter of the Temperance Movement his home was called "Temperance Villa." In Hannah, his wife, he found a perfect helpmate. The Bible was her guide, and her favourite haunts were the prayer meetings and seiat. They were the happy parents of seven boys and seven girls. Apart from the revivalist himself two of the children were more or less fellow-workers in the revival. The Rev. Dan Roberts, who spent years in America, is now in retirement after a successful pastorate at Brynmawr. Miss Mary Roberts was blessed by God in her ministries during the revival. She spent a period as a missionary in Africa. After her marriage with the Rev. Sidney Evans, B.A., she accompanied him to India under the auspices of the Welsh Presbyterian mission and proved herself an indefatigable worker with her husband in the mission and as Principal of the Cherra Poonjee Theological College. On their enforced retirement from the field due to ill health Mr. Evans settled in a pastorate in the homeland.

As the sun is the centre of the planetary system so Evan Roberts was the centre of the revival, He was no ordinary person before his great experience. He came under the spell of poetry and music in early life, and was not ignorant of Welsh literary tradition. His incursions into the realm of literature and poetry prove that he was no mere novice. His moral qualities also were not at a discount in his youthful days. His whole endeavour was to bring the realm of labour into subservience to the law of Christ.

He went on occasional rambles with his fellow-workers on Saturday afternoons. On returning from one of these a friend made the remark-- "There is another idle afternoon," to which Evan Roberts replied--"No, we must be holier men after this." Due to a strike in the Broadoak Colliery, Loughor, where he was employed, he left home to work in Mountain Ash in 1899. There again the Book, the Sanctuary, and the life of the spirit were his whole delight. Even in the bowels of the earth his fellow-workmen felt the atmosphere of the sanctuary.

The "seamy" story and the foul word were under lock and key whenever Evan Roberts appeared. The elders of the local Presbyterian chapel spotted his talents and piety and nothing pleased him more than to be harnessed to the service of the Master. Following the example of Wendell Holmes he saw to it that the tender plant, of devotion was well watered by prayer and meditation, for prayer was his stronghold. Returning to his native Loughor he was lost in books and intelligent conversation.

His companions were Hodge, Bunyan, the Welsh Encyclopaedia, etc. Naturally the church at Moriah encouraged him to enter the ministry but he refused. His refusal brought a change in his attitude as witnessed by the most observant of his fellow worshippers. His talent overcame his meekness. That failing was a passing phase, for the undercurrents of spiritual reality revealed themselves ere long. At this period during a prayer meeting he utterly broke down when giving out a hymn, which expressed a longing for an outpouring of the Spirit of God.

In the words of one present "that scene changed everybody's opinion. Nobody could imagine Evan Roberts crushed by emotion." His spiritual and intellectual developments kept apace. His books, especially the Book, were his one realm of interest. The Bible was never beyond his reach even during his apprenticeship as a blacksmith. Prayer and poetry became a beautiful blend communion with God and music became practically synonymous. Some suggest as a gentle criticism that one of the ironies of the

revival was the tendency to sever spirituality and the arts.

This criticism could not be levelled at the human channel of that great awakening. His intellectual nature endeavoured to curb his emotions. He tried to dam the undercurrents but the darn broke and the current swept him towards the Welsh pulpit. Now he was heard to say--- "Grave or pulpit for me." On his breaking the news to his mother she reminded him that the preacher's world was not all smooth. He assured her that he had given the question deep consideration and had come to the decision "to work to death for my Redeemer and nothing else."

He told his parents-- "I would not go but for the promptings of the Holy Ghost. I will do my best and the consequences will be God's. It will be terrible when I go to the judgment for Christ to tell me--'You could have preached for me but you refused.' A missionary life is the most Christ-like."

The word of God consumed him and like the prophet of old he felt-- "Therefore I am full of the fury of the Lord, I am weary with holding in. I will pour it out upon the children of Israel and upon the assembly of young men together."

During his itinerary through the churches, as is the custom of ministerial candidates in the Welsh Presbyterian church, the only criticism was that he was beyond criticism as a probationer. His classical language, his powerful delivery, his polished sermons, his fervent prayers surprised his hearers. He passed the ministerial examination and September 1904 saw him, enrolled as a student in the Newcastle-Emlyn Grammar School under the tuition of Mr. (after Rev.) John Phillips, son of the seraphic preacher Evan Phillips. He did not remain long at the feet of this Gamaliel of Greek and Latin before the spirit of God definitely called him to the work apportioned him by God. It was then that he revealed one of the great secrets of his life to a friend--"Thirteen years I prayed for the Holy Spirit and thus was I led to it. William Davies one of the elders said in a seiat--'Remember to be faithful; what if the Holy Spirit descended and you were absent; remember Thomas and the loss he sustained.' I said to myself then--"I will have the Holy Spirit, through all kinds of weather. In spite of adverse circumstances I attended every meeting. Often I saw other boys playing with the boats when the tide was full and I felt like joining them. No, I remembered my resolution to be faithful. I could easily remain down all night reading and speaking about revival. During the spring of 1904, on a Friday night, while on my knees, I was swept into space oblivious of time and place--it was communion with God. Prior to that experience my God was distant. I had a fright that night but never afterwards. Such was my trembling that the bed shook and my brother woke. After that I was awakened each night after 1 o'clock. This was remarkable because I usually slept like a rock. After awakening I had three or four hours of communion with God, then after five I could sleep until nine. There followed divine communion until twelve or one o'clock. This lasted for about three months. My one fear when I went to the Grammar School was the losing of this experience. I endeavoured hard to keep up the work of the school but the divine visitations became irresistible."

The same spirit of revival was manifesting itself in other places and upon other persons--Joseph Jenkins, Seth Joshua, W.W. Lewis, W. S. Jones. During October 1904 Seth Joshua and W. W. Lewis held revival meetings at Blaenanerch (immortalised by John Jones, where the same tradition of evangelical preaching has been successfully held up for fifty years by the Rev. M. P. Morgan). At six o'clock on a Thursday morning a brake-full of students went there from Newcastle-Emlyn, and Evan Roberts with them with terrible, mixed feelings. The burden of Seth Joshua's prayer was--"Lord bend us." In the following meeting after breakfast Evan Roberts experienced his Peniel struggle. He was absolutely crushed; he fell forward in prayer and perspiration. Seth Joshua had been praying for four years that "God would take a young

man from the coal-mine or the plough as He chose Elijah of old, not from the centres of learning lest it should nurture pride and self." That memorable Thursday morning in Blaenau-erch his prayer was answered. More than his thirst for knowledge was the thirst of Evan Roberts for souls. His motive was spiritual revival and not intellectual renaissance. His history heretofore proved that he was not of the superficial type, and his desire to spread the knowledge of God became irresistible. He returned to Loughor and there began his great work. He began his work without any personal presumptions. He was conscious of Divine Leadership. He was interviewed by W. T. Stead of "Review of Reviews" fame, who was drowned in the ill-fortuned "Titanic" in 1912-- "This movement is not of me," said Mr. Roberts, "it is of God. I would not dare to direct it. Obey the Spirit --that is our word in everything. It is the Spirit alone which is leading us in our meetings and all that I do."

"You do not preach or teach, or control the meeting?"

"Why should I teach when the Spirit is teaching? What need have these people to be told that they are sinners? What they need is salvation. Do they not know it? It is not knowledge that they lack, but decision--action, and why should I control the meetings. The meetings control themselves, or rather the Spirit that is in them controls them." In his meetings, according to W.T.S., "all the atmosphere of a got-up job is conspicuous by its absence, neither is there any organisation nor is there a director, at least none that is visible to the human eye. In the crowded chapels they even dispensed with instrumental music. The vast congregations were as soberly sane and orderly and at least as reverend as any congregation I ever saw beneath the dome of St. Paul's when I used to go to hear Canon Liddon, the Chrysostom of the English pulpit, but it was aflame with pure religious enthusiasm, the like of which I have never seen in St. Paul's. There was absolutely nothing wild or hysterical unless it be hysterical for the labouring breast to heave with sobbing that cannot be repressed, and the throat to choke with emotion as a sense of this awful horror and shame of the wasted life suddenly bursts upon the soul. On all sides there was the gladness of men and women upon whose eyes had dawned the splendour of a new day, the foretaste of whose glories they are enjoying in the sense of human fellowship and a keen glad zest added to their own lives."

In the conducting of these meetings the role of Evan Roberts (if one may speak of a role) was mysterious. He was there "as one that serveth," not as a leader. From the pen of the Rev. Arthur Goodrich, B.A., we have the following description--

"Evan Roberts is everywhere, now upon his knees besides a man in the last seat by the door, now talking in his quiet triumphant way from half way down the aisle, now standing before them all as a burly man rises in the gallery, and telling him with closed eyes that he seems to see God on high confessing the man even as the man is now confessing God. And always he is dominant, masterful, cheery, and quiet, his power growing with his tense eagerness and his tremendous earnestness. A cynical indifferent critic watching during one of his meetings, would be forced to admit that the young man is sincere to the core, that he descends to no tricks of gesture, word, or act, that he is straightforward and simple to the last degree, that he does not try to force people against their will and yet in some way he draws all before him, not to himself but to the Spirit of whom he is a disciple. What a reward for thirteen years of constant prayer for a revival! Witnessing the multitudes in the valley of decision, and, after witnessing the capitulation of the Baals of drunkenness, dishonesty and vice, hearing them cry out with tears of repentance and joy and the thrill of forgiveness--"The Lord He is God"

We have the testimony of the late Dr. Campbell Morgan who saw the hand of God in the life of the revivalist and the results of the revival-- "Evan Roberts is hardly more than a boy, simple and natural, no orator or leader of men." He had nothing of the masterfulness that characterises such men as Wesley, Whitfield and Moody. One of the most intelligent writers in one of our morning papers said of Evan Roberts, in a tone of sorrow, that he lacked the quality of leadership and "if only some prophet should now arise he could sweep everything before him, but God has not chosen that a prophet shall arise." It is quite true that Evan Roberts was no leader. What was he? I mean with regard to this great movement. He was a mouthpiece, a witness to the fact that there is no human guidance for man or organisation. All Evan Roberts said was this--"It is not man--do not wait for me, depend upon God, obey the Spirit." Whenever moved to do so he spoke under the guidance of the Spirit. His work was not to appeal to men but to create an atmosphere by calling men to follow the guidance of the Spirit in whatever the Spirit should tell them to do. God put him in the forefront of this movement that the world might see that he chooses "things that are not, to bring to nought the things that are; the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty," a man who lacks all the essential qualities which we say make for greatness in order that through him in simplicity and power he may secure the victory.

Some critics of the revival speak of it as ephemeral. The same criticism could be applied to the fruit trees in spring, but the delicious fruit dishes of autumn and winter give the lie to the idea. We look back across practically half a century on that great awakening, the spring of God's spirit, the bloom time. Although the frost of religious indifference has played havoc in the garden of God, yet the church has its delicious tastes of the fruits in the spiritual experience of the remnant of the seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to the Baals of pleasure and vice. The moral standards of our age are no credit to men like Cromwell and Milton. The custodians of our laws are at their wits end when confronted with the problems of divorce and juvenile delinquency. Many churches are mere entertainment clubs; the prayer meeting and the seiat are at a low ebb. Our pulpits are adorned with the laurels of science, philosophy and theology-- and yet there is something lacking. When we think of Evan Roberts, the simple, chaste channel of the Holy Spirit, we would pray God to "do it again!" When we think of God's choice of saintly men in the past we think of the words of Wordsworth addressed to Milton

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:

England hath need of thee: she is a fen

Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,

Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,

Have forfeited their ancient English dower

Of inward happiness. We are selfish men:

Oh, raise us up, return to us again.

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