

The 1859 Revival in Northern Ireland

by Tom Shaw

The sermon explores the profound impact of the 1859 revival in Northern Ireland, highlighting its spiritual, societal, and communal transformations under Pastor James Bain's leadership.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Matthew 9:37, Luke 15:10, John 4:35, Acts 2:17, Acts 3:19, Galatians 6:9, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, James 5:16

Topics: "Revival History", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

Tom Shaw shares the powerful revival that took place in Straid, Northern Ireland in 1859, led by Pastor James Bain. Initially hesitant, Bain witnessed undeniable manifestations of God's power, leading to a profound transformation in the village. The revival brought about societal change, with once sinful places becoming centers for preaching and many turning to Christ. The intense spiritual atmosphere during long Sabbath services and open-air gatherings resulted in numerous conversions and deep spiritual experiences, even among children. Bain's dedication and the community's fervent prayers led to the addition of many new believers to the church, showcasing the remarkable work of God during that time.

Transcript

Straid is still to this day a small village in Northern Ireland. In 1859, the people of Straid and its surroundings were mainly farmers and weavers. In the center of the village, there was a Congregational church that was led by an able pastor named James Bain. For some time prior to the commencement of the revival, the spirit of prayer among the members of the church had intensified. Prayer for an outpouring of the Spirit of God was fervent, resulting in growing congregations.

Fear of the Unreal

At the beginning of April 1859, Bain heard news of what he called "strange things" happening in other parts of the country. However, differing opinions were expressed to him about the genuineness of these unusual spiritual phenomena, so he decided it was best to go and see for himself. What he observed deeply impressed him:

I felt a deep interest in what I had heard, but I required facts to be fully impressed with its divine character. To see the proud sinner stricken and constrained to cry for mercy before an assembled multitude was such an evidence of the heavenly origin of the work to convince the gain-sayer, and to give confidence to the sincere enquirer after truth. It was truly a wonderful manifestation of Divine power.

In spite of what he saw, Bain was still hesitant to promote the interests of what was happening elsewhere among his people. He wanted to be perfectly satisfied about the revival's authenticity before he took a single step to encourage it. However, when he finally became fully convinced that the movement was of God, he threw his whole soul into the great work.

The Changing Scene

God was soon at work in Straid, and the evidence of that fact was clearly manifest. The whole society was being profoundly affected by what God was doing in their midst. The cockfighting pit, which had been a place for vice of the worst kind, became a preaching point where many were won to Christ. Public bars began to close, and profanity and drunkenness, which characterized many lives, were set aside as the Spirit of God moved through the community.

Bain's personal records indicate that a desire for the preaching of the gospel was everywhere, pervading society, and that most people were eager to listen. Large crowds attended wherever the Word of God was preached, and the work of the Spirit was very great. Many came to rejoice in Jesus who before seemed impossible to bring to the truth because of their hatred and rebellion.

Long and Busy Sabbaths

Bain described a typical Sabbath during those revival days:

Our Sabbath services are continuous, from nine in the morning until ten at night. We are engaged from nine to twelve in prayer meetings for the young, from twelve to two in public service, from two to four in prayer meetings, from five to eight in the evening service, and finally in our evening prayer meeting.

The evening services at the church became so well attended that the only suitable place to assemble was outdoors. At one of these evening gatherings, some of the new converts gave testimony, and Bain preached two sermons. The whole audience was gripped with a sense of intense spiritual anxiety. Numbers cried for mercy, and not a single soul departed from that scene until morning.

The journey home from the meetings was characterized by prayer and praise. One observer recalled their practice during those days:

They go home in parties, and sing as they go. Then, when a group is to break off in a different direction, a hymn is sung and a prayer offered where they part, and their prayer and praise may be heard on the lonely brow of the mountains at midnight, in strains so full of faith and love to Jesus, that the heart would be hard indeed that would not be melted by the strangely solemn sound.

Salvation in the Homes

Bain describes how, on occasion, he was called to homes some distance from the church to help souls who were in agonies of conviction over their sin. On his walk back home, he would be called into other houses to help those in similar circumstances. Having helped numbers of distraught souls to Christ, he would continue homeward. After one such outing, he recorded, "I left and enjoyed a most delightful walk home, filled with sweet thoughts on heavenly things, my meditation unbroken, except by the voice of praise which rose from some of the cottages along my path as I passed along."

Under the Open Canopy of the Sky

Open-air preaching was common during the revival, and Bain held many outdoor services. One such open-air gathering was held on a hill not far from Straid Village. It was a Tuesday evening, and it was sunny and clear, so that from this elevated site the hills of Scotland could be seen. Upward of three thousand people attended, and Bain preached the everlasting gospel. He recalls:

The first part of the service continued for three-quarters of an hour. One of the converts gave out a Psalm and prayed, and again I addressed the people in pointed language for half-an-hour. Towards the end of the address, several were converted and moved to another part of the ground. As I pronounced the benediction, every soul was touched, and all seemed unwilling to depart. Many were now anxious. . . . They stayed in prayer and praise until the silvery beams of the moon gave interest and beauty to the scene.

Following some of those open-air meetings, the people would return to the church, light the lamps, and continue until midnight and sometimes into the early morning. The participants seemed to forget that there was any other business in the world.

The Interest of Children

Children also came under the influence of the revival. Although Bain gave oversight to this aspect of the Spirit's work, he was assisted by his wife and at least one of his young daughters.

On a particular Sabbath, a prayer meeting was held by the children from eight to twelve years of age. As they were in prayer, eight of them came under deep conviction of sin and need. Later the whole assembly of children felt God's power among them. Bain said afterward that he had never witnessed such a scene. Children cried for mercy with indescribable earnestness. He left the children in the care of his wife in the manse while he proceeded to the church for the service. As the service in the sanctuary was nearing an end, singing could be heard coming from the house, and later twenty newly converted children took their seats in the church before the pulpit. At the evening service, eight more children were converted, and others came to Christ during the week that followed.

Conclusion

Eternity alone will reveal the extent of the powerful and mighty work of God in 1859 around the village of Straid. In that summer alone, Bain added sixty-nine new members to the fellowship of his church, and he reported that he had conversed with more than four hundred who had found peace with Jesus Christ.

In concluding his own personal account of what he experienced, Bain wrote:

I might enlarge on this glorious work of grace and mercy, but I conclude, praying it may be continued and enlarged. It is now Christmas, in the depth of one of the most severe winters we have had for many years, and yet the work of revival goes on, though not so open and striking as it was during the summer, yet by the still small voice, many are brought to Him in Whom to believe is life. May the Lord be more and more manifest among us by the convicting, converting, and sanctifying power of His Spirit! Amen.

"Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?" (Ps. 85:6).

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