

Christmas Evans

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Cover: Snowdon Horseshoe from Capel Curig.
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CHRISTMAS EVANS

"The mightiest preacher of the age."

Dr. Thomas Raffles of Liverpool, early 19th century

"The great preacher."

Biography by D. Rhys Stephen, 1847

"Christmas Evans was a Paul in labour, a Bunyan in imagination, and a Whitefield in eloquence."

Religious Tract Society biography, mid 19th century

"Of the few distinguished Welsh preachers of whom it may be said without exaggeration that they are known to fame, Christmas Evans has acquired the widest celebrity."

Biography by D. M. Evans, 1863

"The renowned apostle of Wales."

Lecture by Thomas Phillips of Cardiff, 1878

"That great man, whose name occupies the foremost place among those of the leading preachers of Wales . . . the greatest preacher that God has ever given to Wales."

"Echoes from the Welsh Hills" by David Davies, 1883

"This remarkable man and truly eminent minister of the gospel of Christ . . . a household word throughout the Principality."

"Friendly Companion," 1897

"Three preachers stood out above the rest, and they were alike in many things. They were Christmas Evans, a Baptist; John Elias, a Calvinistic Methodist; and Williams of Wern, an Independent. Of these three Christmas Evans alone passed beyond the bounds of the Principality, and established a name and reputation that were world-wide. His name became a household word among Christians everywhere."

Biography by E. Eberard Rees, c. 1936

"The great Christmas Evans, whom some would say was the greatest preacher that the Baptists have ever had in Great Britain."

Puritan Conference Address by Dr. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, 1967

CHAPTER 1

The Forgotten Christmas

It was a beautiful August evening when we set out in search of Christmas Evans's preaching place at Galltraeth at the back of Rhiw mountain. Leaving the main Aberdaron road at Botwnnog, we followed a minor road, and turning from this, a track which led toward the mountain side. Abandoning the car we pressed on, armed with detailed instructions and an Ordnance Survey map. Still there was no sight of Christmas Evans's chapel.

Eventually we knocked at the door of a remote farmstead. A fierce-looking, bearded man answered and received us very kindly. Yes, he knew about Christmas Evans. (Had not camera men been up taking a film only a week or two ago?) Quickly he explained to us where the chapel stood, adding, "And up on the hillside is a well, where he got his holy water!" How mysterious the legends that have arisen about both ancient and modern saints!

THE FORGOTTEN CHRISTMAS

Thanking our kind informer for his help, we began to leave, when he called: "Just one thing! Do you mind going round the other side of the farm? It is a miracle you ever got in. The billy-goat is better than any watch dog!"

We found the old ruined chapel, almost secluded by trees, with a burial ground which must have been used as recently as the last war. This was truly "wild Wales." Behind the chapel rose the mountain. In the other direction the sea at Porth Neigwl was clearly visible.

The sun sank behind the mountains. Here and there a bat flitted past us. The wind began to blow cold. Yet there was something hallowed about the setting.

We had long felt that Christmas Evans was both a great man and a very gracious man and now there was a wish that once again people should know of "the forgotten Christmas."



ABERDARON

CHAPTER 2

Cwmtyll: The Dark Valley

The long, straggling Mid Welsh village of Llandysul (nearly ten miles from Newcastle Emlyn) lies near a wild, mountainous tract of country which has been described as “a scene of the wildest magnificence.” Here over two hundred years ago, at a place called Ysgarwen, lived a poor shoemaker, Samuel Evans, with his wife Johanna. The 25th of December, 1766, was to be a special day to them. They were anxiously awaiting the birth of a baby (their second) and before nightfall a son was born to them. Because of the day of his birth he was given a special name – Christmas. Of his father we know nothing except that he was always fighting sickness; of his mother we have just one mention: the fact that she urged Christmas, when a little boy, to think of his eternal welfare, eliciting the comment that she was a good preacher! Whatever memories he had of his parents he never made known to others; it was a common trait among Welsh people at this time to be very reticent about their family affairs.

There was nothing in Christmas Evans's humble beginnings to suggest any other lot than that of his parents, that he should live and die in obscurity and poverty. But God had intended otherwise.

Much of the Wales into which he was born was still sunk in deep ignorance and gross superstition (the belief in "corpse candles" and the like – strange lights seen when a person died) yet there were few districts entirely untouched by the revival under the preaching of the great Daniel Rowland.

While Christmas was only a child his poor father died and his widow with her little family had to struggle hard against poverty and even destitution. When what seemed a wonderful opening appeared, she was only too glad to seize it. Her brother, James Lewis, had a farm at a place named Bwlchog in the nearby parish of Llanfihangel-ar-arth and promised to take little Christmas and feed and clothe him in return for any duties on the farm he could perform.

Christmas spent six years with his uncle – six years of sadness and misery. He had to look after his uncle's cattle at Cwmtwyll – meaning "the dark valley," a very significant name. His Uncle James proved to be a selfish drunkard and most cruel man. In fact in later life Christmas Evans said of his uncle: "It would be difficult to find a more unconscionable man than James Lewis in the whole course of a wicked world." His uncle's only care seemed to be to get as much work out of him with the smallest possible expense. During these impressionable years, no care was taken of him either morally or religiously or to give him the rudiments of education. At the age of seventeen he could not read a single word.

Yet during these sorrowful years a merciful



A WELSH COTTAGE

providence was watching over him – a fact which left a deep impression on him in later years. Several times he almost lost his life. Once he was dangerously stabbed in the chest in a quarrel with another herdsboy. On another occasion he was nearly drowned after falling into a deep pool and only rescued with difficulty. On yet another occasion a horse ran away with him, galloping through a low, narrow passage so that he might well have been crushed to death. But perhaps his most remarkable deliverance was when he fell from a high tree with an open knife in his hand, remaining unconscious till helped by a passer by. Who cannot fail to see God's watchful care in all this?

In later years there was a story abroad that Christmas Evans had been a boxer but, in fact, he

never fought a battle in his life! Yet he grew up “without God and without hope in the world,” associated only with things low and brutal.

When about seventeen years of age he left his uncle. He is described, at this time, as being specially uncouth and awkward – “a large-boned, muscular, much brooding and somewhat passionate young man.” Not exactly a flattering description!

Still working as a farmer’s boy he moved to Glancllettwr, then Penyralltfawr, then Gwenawlt, then Castellhywel. His days were spent in dire poverty, without friend and without home. But the time had come when God would begin His work in Christmas Evans’s heart.

CHAPTER 3

A New Life

God's sovereignty is most mysterious. Often He uses the most unusual means to accomplish His purposes. So it was with the conversion of Christmas Evans.

At Llwynrhydowain stood a Presbyterian chapel. The minister, David Davies, a great, unwieldy figure, clothed with loose-fitting garments and crowned with flaxen hair (his size was prodigious) was a man of considerable classical attainment, and was renowned as a Welsh bard. Yet his views of the Person of the Lord Jesus were very faulty. A man of great kindness, his loose views of truth sprang from a desire to be easy, rather than from any critical spirit. When an old man he heard a "sound" sermon by the eminent minister "Williams of Wern" and exclaimed, "If that sermon be true, it will be a dark look out for a great many of us."

Yet here at Llwynrhydowain, about the year 1783, a revival of religion broke out. Many young people

appeared to be graciously affected, and united with the church, Christmas Evans being one of them. Of these converts Christmas Evans said: "What became of the major part of these young converts I have never known, but I hope God's grace followed them as it did me, the meanest of them all."

Sadly we have no details of Christmas's spiritual experience at this time, though he tells us that even from his ninth year "the fear of death and of the day of judgment greatly agitated me; so much so that, after a certain fashion, I offered many a prayer. These moods, however, did not last long, but came now and then – and vanished." Concerning the change at this time his own judgment in later days was not too favourable; yet in his old age he said:

"The fear of dying in an ungodly state especially affected me (even from childhood), and this apprehension clung to me till I was induced to rest upon Christ. All this was accompanied by some little knowledge of the Redeemer; and now, in my seventieth year, I cannot deny that this concern was the dawn of the day of grace on my spirit, although mingled with much darkness and ignorance."

Even from his spiritual infancy he was blessed with a spirit of prayer:

"The spirit of energetic supplication was given to me early. A sense of danger prompts the soul to seek deliverance. Earnestness in prayer grew with me, though I frequently feared it would become extinct. Still, it was not entirely extinguished, even in those days of darkness when I but barely perceived that the merits of Christ were the only plea, without reference to anything of our own. After I came to know and feel that the righteousness of Christ formed the only ground to be depended upon before God, I was able with every sense



A WELSH COTTAGE KITCHEN

of unworthiness to approach Him with a stronger expectation. The Christian must have a rock in the merits of the Redeemer to rest upon; and here he finds 'a place of refuge, and a covert from the storm and the rain.'"

According to the popular account Christmas Evans very early had to suffer for Jesus' sake. Having now been compelled to separate from all his wicked friends and acquaintances, he had to prove their bitterness against his Master and against himself. He had just bought a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and, as he journeyed home, paused from time to time to read a few sentences. Suddenly six of his former companions waylaid him, beat him unmercifully, whilst one hit him in the eye with a stick – as a result of which the eye was lost. In later years he was known as "the one-

eyed preacher of Wales” but even from his youth he could say with Paul, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” And all this simply because he was turned from sin to God.* Strangely, Christmas Evans’s brother, who spent his life almost as a tramp, looked remarkably like his brother and he too had lost an eye – how, we do not know.

Though his pastor’s preaching was deficient in the truth, he showed the greatest interest in Christmas Evans. Persons blessed with grace are seldom content to remain ignorant and Christmas was no exception. He thirsted for knowledge. A few of the young men bought Bibles and candles and used to meet together in a barn at Penyralltfawr. Referring to himself and others at this time he says:

“We had but little knowledge of the way of salvation, and less experience of it in our hearts; but many who were not able to read a word before now became so anxious to learn that they were soon able to read the Scriptures. I should suppose that up to this time not one out of seven persons in these districts knew how to read.”

No wonder that later he said, “The Bible is the Book of books, a Book breathed out of heaven . . . I am very thankful for books written by man, but it is God’s Book that sheds the light of life everlasting on all other books.” In a month he could read the Bible in Welsh and then he borrowed books to learn a little English.

* It is only fair to say that another account does not connect the loss of his eye with suffering for Jesus’ sake but rather with a period of backsliding. A third account connects the two: in a backsliding state he had gone to a fair, but coming away was assaulted because of his Christian profession.

Eventually Mr. Davies, realising the boy's enthusiasm, took him to his school for six months. Quite a remarkable story is told of how this came about. One evening Christmas asked John, the senior farm hand, if he could go to hear his pastor (and master – the farm on which he worked belonged to Mr. Davies) preach the following Sabbath. John gladly gave permission, promising to look after the sheep and cattle for him.

Throughout the service Christmas sat with his head buried in his hands, and as soon as the service was over hastened home without a word to anyone. After a quick dinner he was out among the sheep to relieve John.

David Davies could not help noticing the young man's unusual behaviour. After dinner he sent for John and asked him about Christmas Evans. "He is a strange boy!" he added. But John said, "You come with me." Together, quietly, they crept into the field and there Christmas was busy preaching the morning sermon (almost word for word) to a congregation of cows, horses and sheep.

On the way home Mr. Davies asked, "Do you know where I can get a boy to take the place of Christmas?" The boy was soon found and that evening John told Christmas he would no longer be needed to look after his sheep. This news was received with sorrow. What had he done to deserve to be dismissed? But his master soon relieved his fears: "You are to come to my school. You shall be educated free of charge."

Though there were many defects in David Davies's theology, there was a natural discernment (and also kindness) which made him single Christmas Evans out for what help could be given.

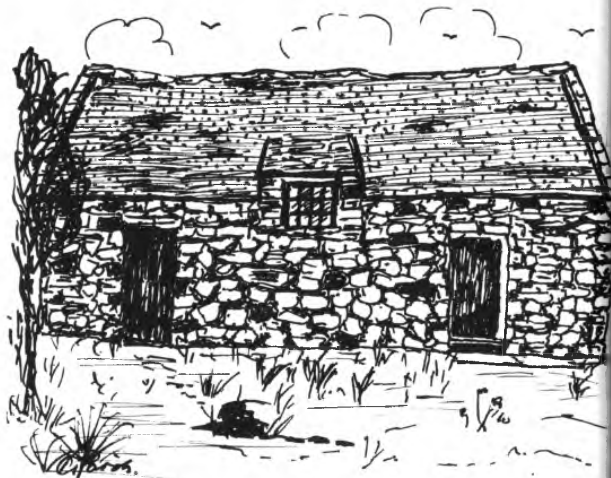
Here he learned Latin grammar, but it was not possible for his education to be continued for longer than six months.

CHAPTER 4

The Young Preacher

Very early in his Christian life Christmas Evans seemed to be concerned about preaching. The night after he suffered the loss of his eye, he had a remarkable dream. The day of judgment was come and the world was in a blaze, yet with confidence he cried, "Jesus, save me!" In his dream it seemed as if the Lord turned towards him and said, "It was thy intention to preach the gospel, but now it is too late for the day of judgment is come." When he awoke, his dream clung to him. Throughout his life Christmas Evans had many remarkable impressions through dreams, and believed that God spoke to him in this way.

From the time of that dream there was a deep concern that he should preach. There were, however, obstacles in the way. There was a rule connected with the church where he was a member that no-one should be permitted to preach till he had passed



EIGHTEENTH CENTURY WELSH CHAPEL

through a college course.

It is an interesting fact that the night Christmas Evans was received into church membership, another young man who was to become an eminent minister was received at the same time. This was David Davies (the same name as their pastor), afterwards of Swansea. Their first pastor always regretted in after years that, because of the rule concerning preaching in their church, two of Wales's greatest preachers were lost to their denomination. It is also interesting to recall that both the young men preached their first sermons in the same cottage in the same week.

Cottage preaching was of far more importance in bygone Wales than many today could realise, and the congregations which met in those old Welsh cottages were very discerning.

It was at one of these cottage meetings that Christmas Evans first preached. The cottage belonged to a kind tailor who taught singing classes in the neighbourhood, and who helped the young men to learn to read. However, to say the least, his beginnings were not very auspicious. With a desire to do well, his first sermon was taken from Bishop Beveridge's *Thesaurus Theologicus* (most probably borrowed from his pastor). The sermon seemed to make some impression – till a farmer who was among the hearers went home and found the very book (and sermon) on his shelves! (What a witness, incidentally, to the knowledge, even intellectualism, among the old Welsh rural society! Which of us have read *Thesaurus Theologicus*?) In later years, this “stealing sermons” was a practice which became rather common in Wales, but against which Christmas Evans vehemently protested!

Thus the poor boy's reputation as a preacher seemed gone. “Still,” said the good farmer, “I have some hope of the son of Samuel the shoemaker because the prayer was as good as the sermon.” Perhaps he would have thought otherwise had he known that the prayer likewise was borrowed – from a collection of prayers by Griffith Jones of Llanddowror.

But “the lad Christmas, Samuel the shoemaker's son,” was encouraged by one or two Baptist and Independent ministers in the locality, and occasionally preached for them, especially for Mr. Perkins, the Independent minister at Pencader, who showed him much kindness and sympathy, and often had him to preach in his pulpit.

But, at this time, he was often in agony of soul concerning his own state before God, no doubt due to

THE YOUNG PREACHER

the “uncertain sound” of his own pastor’s ministry. The tendency of what he heard preached was to encourage self-righteousness, whilst he himself was bitterly conscious of his own guilt and corruption.

Yet this was to be the man of whom it would be said in later years: “He helped to fill Wales with the radiance of the pure gospel.”

CHAPTER 5

Baptism – and Timothy Thomas

God never leaves His work unfinished. We are not, then, surprised to discover that as Christmas Evans was led by the Holy Spirit more deeply into the truth, he became dissatisfied with the erroneous preaching of his first pastor. Apart from the false views on the Deity of Christ, he could not be satisfied with Arminianism or with legality of any kind. He began to hear preachers, some of whom were giants of the faith, who had clear views of divine truth, and so he was led into more gracious views of the Person and finished work of Christ, and the doctrine of justification by faith.

As he grew in grace, he became haunted with tremendous fears and said he felt his heart to be “a little hell within him.” During many seasons of deep darkness and depression, he learned the secret of self-distrust. He became increasingly attracted to people of Calvinistic views.

One of his fellow members was a man named Amos. Hearing that he had left the church and united with the Calvinistic Baptists, Christmas began to study the Word of God more carefully and was led to see that both in doctrine and in practice they were much nearer the Word of God. Their godliness of life and remarkable knowledge of the Scriptures also strongly attracted him to the great doctrines of the gospel which they professed. (A similar change took place in his young friend David Davies, but he joined the Independents.) Christmas Evans gives his own account:

“A person of the name of Amos had left the church at Llwynrhydowen, and had been baptized at Aberduar. He came to see me, and I began to assail the Anabaptist heresy, as I had been accustomed to consider it. But Amos soon silenced me. I attributed my defeat to my ignorance of the New Testament, and therefore began to read from the beginning of Matthew, to prepare myself for the next interview. Having read the New Testament through, I found not a single verse in favour of Paedobaptism (i.e. baptizing infants). I met frequently with passages in the Old and New Testaments referring to the circumcision and the naming of children, their bringing up in the ‘nurture and admonition of the Lord,’ etc., but with none making any mention of their baptism, while about forty passages seemed to me to testify clearly for baptism on a profession of faith. These scriptures spoke to my conscience, and convinced me of the necessity of personal obedience to the baptism which Christ had ordained. After a little struggle between the flesh and the spirit, obedience and disobedience, I applied to the Baptist church at Aberduar. I was cordially received, but not without some fear on my part that I was a rank Arminian still.”

He was then about twenty years and six months old. (This would be in the summer of 1787.) He was baptized in the River Duar by Timothy Thomas. It would appear that a true revival was taking place at Aberduar at that time, and many were added to the church.

Christmas Evans's new pastor was a most remarkable man - a gentleman, living on a splendid farm, preaching and fulfilling the work of a pastor without any monetary reward. He was renowned for his noble appearance, his independent spirit and his generosity. Each Saturday he would ride thirty or forty miles through the wilds of Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire to be ready for the Lord's day services. Often when preaching or baptizing in the open air, the mobs that assembled to cause a disturbance were overcome by his gentlemanly bearing - some fearing he was at least a magistrate.

But he was also a man of very clear theological views. A beautiful story shows us what calibre of man he was. On one occasion one of his church members was brought up on a case of discipline; he had knocked a man down. On enquiry it appeared that the man, a Unitarian, had said some blasphemous things about the Person of Christ and His precious blood. This had proved too much and, losing control of himself, the Baptist member had knocked him down. Timothy Thomas carefully listened to all the circumstances and then dismissed the case, wryly remarking, "Well, I cannot say you did the right thing - but I quite believe I should have done the same! Go, and sin no more."

Such was Christmas Evans's new pastor, and it is little wonder that under such a man and such a

ministry he became more established in the truth. The noble old gentleman died at the age of 86. When in his old age he was asked, "How many have you baptized?" he would reply, "I have baptized at least two thousand; and thirty of them have become ministers of the gospel. And I baptized Christmas Evans."



EIGHTEENTH CENTURY WELSH FARMHOUSE

CHAPTER 6

Llyn: A Gale of Grace

Martin Luther said that prayer, meditation and temptation are the things that make a minister. This waiting time, a time of deep exercise, was a time of sore temptation for Christmas Evans. Often he suffered deep spiritual depression. He knew he must preach but felt himself a mass of ignorance and sin. He was grieved by his first attempt in the cottage. Then, committing his own sermons to memory, he felt he had forfeited the help of the Holy Spirit. Attempting the opposite and preaching without any premeditation at all, he said:

"But this was a change from bad to worse; I had neither sense, warmth, nor life, nothing but a poor weakly intonation that could impress no one. I thought that God would have nothing to do with me as a preacher, or in any other way, but that I was altogether a mass of carnality. The sound of my own voice, in praying or in preaching, disheartened me, as it seemed to proceed