

Revival in William Williams' Time

by Eifion Evans

An excerpt from the biography of William Williams found in PURSUED BY GOD (a translation by Eifion Evans from the Welsh poem 'THEOMEMPHUS'.)

Williams had been converted in a revival. Several revivals broke out during his long ministry. He witnessed one great wave after another of God's Spirit breathing upon the land. In *The Experience Meeting* he describes the transformation in church and society which is brought about by such a season of refreshing from God:

"One time, there were just a few of us, professing believers, gathered together, cold and unbelievably dead, in a meeting which we called a special service, so discouraged as to doubt whether we should ever meet again... Forced by cowardice, unbelief and the onslaughts of Satan, we resolved to give up our special meeting; and now we were about to offer a final prayer, fully intending never again to meet thus in fellowship. But it is when man reaches the lowest depths of unbelief that God imparts faith, and when man has failed, then God reveals Himself. So here, with us in such dire straits, on the brink of despair, with the door shut on every hope of success, God Himself entered into our midst, and the light of day from on high dawned upon us for one of the brethren – yes, the most timid of us all, the one who was strongest in his belief that God would never visit us – while in prayer, was stirred in his spirit and laid hold powerfully on heaven, as one who would never let go. His tongue spoke unusual words, his voice was raised, his spirit was aflame; he pleaded, he cried to God, he struggled, he wrestled in earnest, like Jacob, in the agony of his soul. The fire took hold of others – all were awakened, the coldest to the most heedless took hold and were warmed; the spirit of struggling and wrestling fell on all; we all went with him into the battle, with him we laid hold upon God, His attributes, His Word and His promises, resolving that we would never let go our hold until all our desire should be satisfied.

"And this came to pass, for there fell upon us the sweet breath of the love of the Lord... Up until now the service was only beginning, for prayer, singing, praise and blessing were redoubled, and no one felt like bringing things to an end; and now some were weeping, some praising, some singing, some filled with heavenly laughter, and all full of wonder and love and amazement at the Lord's work – to my mind like the time of the Apostles, when the Spirit descended from on high on a handful of fearful people... As it was then, so it was here now."

The figures used of such occasions were those of Isaiah, '*the wilderness blossoming as the rose*', God '*rending the heavens*' and the favourite expression in the Psalms, God '*coming down*', visiting His people after a time of barrenness. From the New Testament the parallel drawn was invariably that of the day of Pentecost. Throughout such occasions, Williams insisted that revival was God's sovereign prerogative and activity, beyond the arrangement or engineering of man. Such revivals were spontaneous, general, powerful, and widespread. The revival of 1762, in particular, was exceptional in its manifestations of the divine presence and human joy. One instrument that God used in its initiation was the appearance of a collection of Welsh hymns by Williams, *Caniadau, Y shai sydd ar y Mor o Wydr...* ('Songs of those on the Sea of Glass' a phrase taken from Revelation 15:2). Williams defended the experiences of the revival in two pamphlets, *Llythyr Martha Philopur* ('Martha Philopur's Letter'), and *Atteb Philo-Evangelius* ('The Answer of Philo Evangelius').

What Jonathan Edwards did in America to justify from Scripture the reality and manifestation of true revivals, Williams did in Wales. Williams demonstrated that there was plenty of Scripture precedent for elevated experiences under the gospel's influences. The true must be distinguished from the counterfeit, of course, and religion does not consist merely in experiences, however powerful. But emotion is a genuine, necessary, inevitable part of the sinner's response to the gospel. Here are some passages from Williams's defence:

(Martha's Letter:) O blessed hour, when my soul was in the greatest extremity, the day dawned upon me. In a moment I felt my sins forgiven. I received the Word in fullest ecstasy, fuller than any prisoner would feel on being released from sentence of hanging... Like the woman of Samaria, fire is kindled in me, which I can no more extinguish than she could, without exploding! While you preach the Word of Life, I do my utmost to restrain myself, lest I cause others to stumble... and I often cannot stop my tongue from crying out, 'GOD IS GOOD'... The earliest opportunity I get, while Christ's love burns within me, and I give vent to my spiritual emotions, it is inevitable that I shout the Lord's praises! I bless and magnify God; I leap and shout for joy, in so great salvation, that I never know before. At such time my memory is more alert, and innumerable Scriptures flood to mind, all of this one strain – praising God for His free grace. My senses are sharpened, I understand the things of God in a clearer light, my reason and emotions are so disciplined, that I am careful not to say or do anything which would cause my brethren to stumble, or the ungodly to blaspheme.

(Philo's Answer:) With the heart man believes to salvation; that men have believed some system of divinity, however true, unless those principles which he has believed in his mind have taken root in his heart, so that he loves God's Son, rejoices in His salvation, denies himself, takes up his cross, and follows the Lamb through all contempt, his knowledge only makes him boastful. He is blind and cannot see afar. He but knows the Lord to be gracious without ever proving it. He never felt the authority of His grace within him, and how will such a person love the Saviour of the world? It is this lack of proving God's grace that accounts for the fact that all the world in not praising, leaping and singing glory to God.

Those words were written in the heat of the 1762-3 revival. Another apology appeared in 1784, in the form of a long poem abounding in scriptural instances of God's people rejoicing in the gracious and powerful deliverance from sin's plight, *Atteb I wr Bonheddig, A geisiodd brydyddu senn...* ('Reply to a gentleman who wrote a poetic rebuke'). One verse will serve to illustrate its theme:

We came from Babel's prison, by heaven's almighty grace
And so a heavenly laughter adorns our glowing face;
And those who were so tongue-tied now sing aloud with joy,
The praise of God our Saviour our tongues shall aye employ.

With the other leaders, Williams insisted that the great need of God's people was the influence of the Holy Spirit, bringing life and authority to the soul. This is what the Welsh Methodists longed for more than anything, God's fire, life, power, and light, to bring them into the fullness of Christ.

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