

2 Becoming a Christian

Aged ten, Charles met an elderly Christian man who became a great help to him in explaining and commending the Christian faith. He was Rees Hugh. Although living 'a few miles' away, Charles visited him at least weekly to hear him talk lovingly and warmly about Jesus Christ. Charles was encouraged listening to him, regarding him as 'my father in Christ' and loved the aged saint dearly. More about this later.

Providence

Providence was a key doctrine for Charles – the Creator-God sustains but also rules over the entire world, including people everywhere and all events, big or small. He works out His wise and good purpose in all that happens so we are not controlled by impersonal fate or chance but by a personal, living God. Even insignificant details and events are all under God's complete control and within His good purpose. In his famous and influential *Geiriadur Ysgrythurol* (Bible Dictionary) Charles describes providence in some depth.¹ He reminds readers that different words are used in the Bible to describe God's

¹ Parch Thomas Charles, B.A, *Geiriadur Ysgrythur* (Scriptural Dictionary), (Bala: R. Saunderson, 1864, 6th Impression), pp. 770-1.

providential purpose as in Acts 4:28, Romans 8:28-30, 1 Corinthians 2:7 and Ephesians 1:5, 9-11. God does not do anything without a wise, righteous but good purpose, though often His actions are beyond our understanding. God's absolute control and plan in all things worldwide has a special application in fulfilling the divine plan of salvation for the elect through Jesus Christ. In that light Charles could say: 'At last providence brought me acquainted with an aged, holy, and pious man, by name, Rees Hugh...' For Charles, providence was vitally important for understanding life and the world as well as his personal circumstances and the work given him to do. In the twenty-first century Christians ought to give more attention to this teaching and trust God whatever the circumstances may be.

Providence illustrated

Thomas Charles was born in 1755 near St Clears in Carmarthenshire, South West Wales. His family rented a large farm but his father, a respected church warden, was not a successful farmer which led to financial difficulties. The young child had several siblings and his mother exercised considerable influence on his early years. In God's providence, the area where Charles lived had a Christian background dating back to the mid-sixteenth century but it was a local vicar, Griffith Jones (1684–1761) in Llanddowror, who influenced Charles but only indirectly for he died five years before Charles attended the parish school there.

Griffith Jones preached extensively in Wales and many people were converted through him. One strategic aspect of Jones's work was establishing schools in the country. His schools were different from those of today for they circulated around Wales, remaining in one locality for three months. As very few people were able to read, the purpose of these schools was to teach children in the

daytime to read and then adults in the evenings. Jones thought three months was adequate time for all to learn to read. Jones was also involved in appointing and training the teachers and collecting money from wealthy people and charities to support the schools. Those attending the schools were taught to read the Welsh Bible and taught the Catechism of the Church of England.² The population in Wales at this time was just over half a million people but nearly half the population had been taught to read through these schools, becoming acquainted with the Bible and its message. Thomas Charles was able to build upon and extend considerably this massive contribution.

When probably eleven years of age, Charles was sent to the parish church school in Llanddowror where he studied for three years until he was fourteen years of age. Here he would hear more about Griffith Jones and develop a more serious interest in the Christian faith, becoming more aware of sin in his life and regularly walking several miles to hear the gospel preached. Christian books also helped him and he felt the need to share with others his thoughts about the Christian faith. In that respect he felt lonely so valued meeting Rees Hugh, walking several miles, sometimes twice a week, to see him. Rees Hugh had come to trust the Lord through Griffith Jones's ministry, for Charles describes him as 'an old disciple of Mr Griffith Jones of Llanddowror'. Clearly 'his conversation', writes Thomas Charles, 'was much blessed to me'. How was he helped by Rees Hugh? Several clues are provided in what he wrote later in life. One fact was the 'great joy' the man had when sharing about the Lord Jesus. Being a Christian was not a miserable, boring affair for him. Far from it. He loved and knew Christ so well that he delighted

² The *Catechism of the Church of England* (1662); Jones wrote his own *Catechism* in 1752 which expanded the former.

in talking about the Lord. Charles explains he 'never was unaffected' by listening to Rees Hugh and remembered him with great affection. Rees Hugh also prayed for the young Charles.

Despite this friendship, Thomas Charles was not a Christian. He sought answers to questions about the Christian faith and decided to receive Holy Communion in the parish church. He wanted to become a Christian and throughout this period he was also helped by the kindness, understanding and love of his family.

Afraid

At the age of fourteen, Thomas Charles suddenly became afraid. There was a feeling of 'dread' on his part. Referring to Rees Hugh, Charles adds: 'My old dear friend was very fearful and anxious for me in my new situation.' The 'new situation' was his father's decision to send him to Carmarthen Academy for further studies. The Academy had a long and varied history in terms of location and belief with its nominal, religious influence despite the different theological views of tutors. Academic standards were high, possibly the best in Wales, so Charles, despite his 'dread', would receive an excellent education there. His friend, Rees Hugh, 'prayed earnestly with me and for me before I went', writes Charles, 'and I have often thought I have received many blessings in answer to his prayers to God for me.' Although he did not realise at the time, in providence God was preparing Charles for his future work by directing him to the Academy. For example, one tutor gave Thomas Charles a great love for Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Later in his life he wrote: 'I have no greater pleasure in the world ... than reading the Holy Scriptures in the languages in which the Holy Spirit delivered them; namely the Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek.' Charles used the biblical languages well later so here was another example

of God's wise providence preparing the teenager for his future work. His father's decision was a wise one.

Conversion

There were temptations facing the teenager in the Academy but a further providence was that he lodged with his older sister Elizabeth and her husband Joseph Thomas, respected merchants in Carmarthen. This was a considerable help for Charles in adapting to a new situation and being confronted by many challenges and snares.

Another aspect of God's providence is that during his studies in Carmarthen, Charles attended the local 'Methodist' society. Methodism was a spontaneous, later an organised, movement within the Church of England for many decades, emphasising a personal and joyful experience of God's grace in Christ. They accepted major Bible doctrines, emphasising God's eternal plan to save a vast number of sinful people; for them Christ died to redeem them from the guilt, power and punishment of sin. Only God by the Holy Spirit could awaken and change sinners inwardly, leading them to personal faith in Christ then protecting and blessing them in union with Christ until they reached heaven. Charles benefitted from hearing those in the society talking about the Lord Jesus and knowing Him personally. However, for the first three years in the Academy, Charles had not become a Christian although he continued to read Christian books.

'Happy day'

The 20 January 1773 was an important date for the seventeen-year-old student. It was 'a day much to be remembered by me as long as I live'. He often referred back in thankfulness to God for what happened on this date. Charles had gone some distance to hear the

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well-known Daniel Rowland³ preach; his text was Hebrews 4 verse 15: 'For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin' (NKJV).

What happened? Charles explains: 'I had such a view of Christ as our High Priest, of his love, compassion, power, and all-sufficiency, as filled my soul with astonishment – with joy unspeakable and full of glory.' Charles was convicted of his sin and unbelief, including the hard views of God he had retained. Now in seeing the Lord's amazing love and unlimited power, his mind 'was overwhelmed and overpowered with amazement'.⁴ It was so amazing what he heard that he felt it was too good to be true! 'I could not believe for very joy,' he explains. Five years later he refers back to this date: '... a special day, to be greatly remembered. So glorious was the revelation of divine truths... By mercy they are ... as glorious and valuable as ever, they are always new, always awakening.' Although he believed gospel truths before and enjoyed talking with Christians about the Lord, Charles now experienced the power and reality of the gospel in a deeply personal way. He confessed: 'I had some idea of gospel truths before floating in my head, but they never powerfully and with divine energy penetrated my heart until now.' He had now become a Christian. Eight years later he insisted that on the 20 January 1773, 'the light of the knowledge of the glorious gospel first shone brightly in my soul in the face of Jesus Christ.'

Whether a person can date conversion so precisely as Charles is unimportant, for many come to saving faith in Christ over a period of

³ Daniel Rowland (1711–90) was a curate in the parish church of Llangeitho in rural West Wales. He ministered here powerfully for fifty years, and attracted large congregations from all over Wales.

⁴ DEJ, 1, 31.

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time. Charles himself had been on a journey over several years when suddenly the Lord dealt with him under the preaching of the gospel. What is essential is personal faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord resulting from a supernatural, inward work of the Holy Spirit giving new life and a radically new nature to love, trust and obey the Lord.

For two more years Thomas Charles studied in Carmarthen Academy and though tempted often 'God's invisible hand preserved me – the everlasting arms were underneath.' He also enjoyed rich fellowship with other Christians, the powerful preaching of the gospel 'and also much of the divine presence in them'.

In the Lord's providence, a huge surprise lay ahead of him.