

William Grimshaw: Showers on Dry Ground

by Faith Cook

The sermon tells the story of William Grimshaw's ministry in Haworth, where he preached the gospel of salvation and saw a remarkable revival that transformed the lives of the people and had a lasting impact on the town.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Isaiah 55:6, Matthew 9:37, Acts 3:19, Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Galatians 6:9, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 1 Peter 4:8

Topics: "Revival Preaching", "Personal Conversion"

Description

Faith Cook shares the inspiring story of William Grimshaw, a dedicated preacher in Haworth, England, whose humble beginnings led to a great revival in the region. Grimshaw's early preaching focused on the necessity of conversion, stirring deep conviction of sin among his hearers. Despite facing personal struggles and doubts, Grimshaw's passionate appeals to forsake sin and powerful denunciations of sin led to a spiritual awakening, filling his church and drawing crowds from surrounding areas. Through his relentless efforts and the use of lay preachers, Grimshaw saw a remarkable conversion of at least 120 individuals, transforming lives and homes in Haworth.

Transcript

In 1742, our dear Lord was pleased to visit my parish," wrote William Grimshaw in a description of the work of God that had taken place in the village of Haworth, a rural town in the north of England. It would be easy to assume from these words that the remarkable events that occurred began quickly, but this would be inaccurate. The work started slowly, and Grimshaw records that at first only "a few souls" were affected under the Word. Yet, from this humble beginning, a great revival began that swept the region.

Grimshaw's preaching at the outset of his ministry in Haworth was of a unique character. A local merchant wrote, "He began to preach Christ and the necessity of conversion among a people as ignorant as the country is wild." Henry Venn confirms that Grimshaw's early preaching disturbed the spiritual indifference of his hearers, and brought many under deep conviction of sin: "Very soon the good effects of his preaching became visible. Many of his careless flock were brought into deep concern for the salvation of their souls."¹

Grimshaw's spiritual pilgrimage was similar to John Bunyan's in many respects, and like Bunyan, he would have been able to say, "I preached what I felt, even that under which my poor soul did groan and tremble." The law of God and divine punishment for sin were his predominant themes at this time.

John Newton saw this emphasis in Grimshaw's ministry as an important precursor to a fuller preaching of the gospel, particularly when addressing a congregation that had received little previous instruction:

When he moved from Todmorden to settle in Haworth, Grimshaw had a deep sense of the evil of sin and a warm compassion for sinners who, ignorant of their state and danger, were carelessly heading down a path that led to destruction. He likewise knew that he was able to point out the way of salvation by faith in the Son of God, but his knowledge and judgment were not yet fully ripened. He was more acquainted with the conflicts than the comforts of the believer. He was harassed by distressing doubts and fears, and fiercely assaulted by the temptations and fiery darts of the enemy. Perhaps a minister at this stage of experience, which some undervalue as legalistic, is peculiarly well-suited to preach to ignorant and wicked people whose habits of sin have been strengthened by long disregard for the holy law of God and who have had no opportunity for hearing the gospel.²

The effect of Grimshaw's passionate appeals to the conscience of his hearers, and of his powerful denunciations of sin, soon became apparent. The empty pews gradually began to fill. Men and women from all the surrounding areas began to pour into Haworth to hear the new minister whose preaching was affecting his congregation so deeply. Venn describes the scene: "This lively, powerful manner of representing the truths of God was much talked about and brought hundreds to Grimshaw's church out of curiosity."³

Many who attended were awakened to a realization of the offensiveness of sin to a holy God and wept openly. Venn recorded of those services, "The whole congregation has often been in tears on account of their provocations against God, and under a sense of His goodness in yet sparing them and waiting to be gracious to them."⁴ A man who heard him preach during these days gave this description of Grimshaw's preaching, "He frequently rolled with thunder, but with his severity mingled tears like the Redeemer's over Jerusalem."

"My church began to be crowded, insomuch that many were obliged to stand out of doors," wrote Grimshaw as he recalled these days. And still the stream of visitors from other parishes continued to pour into Haworth each Sunday. Men awakened to their spiritual needs would be eager for their wives and families to also hear the preaching. Some came willingly, while others did not.

One anecdote, told by an anonymous writer who had heard the story firsthand, illustrates this second category of hearers. He reports that after hearing so much of the new preaching in Haworth, a local farmer attended the services one Sunday out of curiosity:

It pleased God that day to make him a monument of His mercy to the great surprise of all his neighbors. However, this man now found himself much distressed on account of his wife whom he knew to be in a lost condition. He could not bear the thought of her being lost, so he frequently reasoned with her, but she hated the ways of God, and particularly the late change made in her husband. When he endeavored to persuade her to go with him to hear Mr. Grimshaw, she would reply, "I'll not go to hear that Black Devil." One Sabbath morning, being distressed, he told her that he could not leave her behind, and that if she would not consent to go with him, he would be obliged to use violence. When she absolutely refused, he put on her better clothes, took a rod, and in a violent passion declared that every time she refused to walk along, he would not spare her, for he was determined she should hear Mr. Grimshaw that very day. They lived about six miles from the church (she told me the story when her husband was sitting by). She said, "He drove me as men drive a beast to market. I went yelling and abusing Mr. Grimshaw all the way." Yet

that was the very day which God had fixed to shew mercy to her precious soul. She returned in great distress, and the next Sabbath went voluntarily. Mr. Grimshaw, observing her particularly affected, asked her after the sermon where she lived. When she had informed him, he said, "On such a day I will come and see you, and preach in your house."⁵

This woman became one of his most affectionate hearers, and he used her home as a preaching outpost frequently in years to come.

As we have noted, there were clearly fruits from Grimshaw's ministry during his first two years in Haworth.

However, much of his labor was directed at breaking up the fallow ground by calling the people to forsake their sins. Such preaching was leading to a widespread spiritual concern among his own parishioners and the people from the surrounding areas. This anxiety about sin would shortly turn to a powerful converting work and yield an abundant harvest of blessing in Haworth and many other parts of Yorkshire.

At this time, Grimshaw began to preach with an increase of power and freedom he had not known previously. Already tireless in toiling for the kingdom of God, he now redoubled his efforts. "Too happy himself in the knowledge of Christ," wrote Henry Venn, "he could not rest satisfied without taking every method he thought likely to spread the knowledge of his God and Savior."⁶

Certainly, by any standard, there had already been a remarkable work of God in Haworth, but now the showers that had been refreshing the thirsty ground began to fall as torrents. The dry waste was soon transformed into "a garden of the Lord, producing many trees of righteousness, planted by the Lord Himself," as Newton aptly commented. The minds and consciences of Grimshaw's hearers were even more readily subdued under the truth.

In the 18 months following September 1744, Grimshaw had reason to believe that at least 120 people were converted--people whose subsequent life gave every indication that their profession was genuine. Describing the revival that broke out in its fullness at this time, Joseph Williams wrote:

He reckons six score souls savingly renewed, whom as fast as he can discover evidences of a thorough work in their hearts, he forms into classes. . . . He observes there is such a diversity in the Spirit's operations, that rarely any two of them have been wrought upon in the same way. Some have sunk down in the church under a terrifying sense of divine wrath, while others have been drawn with the cords of love. Some have received a sealed pardon in a few weeks or days, while others have been held many months under a spirit of bondage.⁷

One of the most notable characteristics of these days was the depth of emotion with which the people listened to Grimshaw's preaching, and also the physical phenomena that accompanied it. "It was amazing," wrote Grimshaw, "to hear and see what weeping, roaring, and agonies many people were seized with at the apprehension of their sinful state and the wrath of God."

Such phenomena, often an accompaniment of a revival in its early stages, appear to have been unexpected and spontaneous. But Grimshaw could see that these extremes of response were often hurtful to the work. Like John and Charles Wesley, he came to realize that Satan was only too ready to take advantage of heightened expressions of emotion and spiritual turmoil in order to counterfeit the truth and bring the work of God into disrepute.

Commenting further on this, Grimshaw wrote, "Soon after the devil observed crying and distress of soul beginning to affect people who heard the Word, he also began to seize people with strange distortions, convulsions, and hideous roaring to bring, as we plainly saw, contempt and disgrace upon the true work of God." Grimshaw added that most of the physical phenomena were also associated with spurious professions of conversion. However, almost all such heightened manifestations of emotion died out after 1747, a fact that Grimshaw noted in a letter to a friend: "For seven years past, the cryings and agitations in sincere penitents are in a manner ceased and are rarely seen or heard of."

Finding the spiritual demands that the revival produced in Haworth greater than he could meet on his own, William Grimshaw made an important innovation in the life of his parish during 1745--he began to use the gifts and services of lay preachers. This was a change to which his prejudices as a churchman would have made him naturally resistant. The practice had become the hallmark of Wesley's Methodism since first John Cennick and then Thomas Maxfield had begun to preach in 1739, but in 1745 Grimshaw had yet to meet either of the Wesley brothers.

Thus by 1744 or 1745, Grimshaw had clearly become what John Wesley called "irregular." By this Wesley meant that in forming societies, in beginning to preach outside his own parish boundaries, and in welcoming the help of laymen to preach and exhort, Grimshaw was acting outside the terms of his training and license as an ordained minister of the Church of England. Neither the Wesleys nor Grimshaw found such a pathway easy, but the needs of the people destitute of spiritual light and the zeal of these men to please God above all else formed their all-compelling motive.

News of the preaching in Haworth that God was using to turn men, women, and young people from their sins spread far and wide. "Haworth soon became the common subject of conversation all around the country," comments one who knew Grimshaw personally, "and there were such undeniable proofs of God being there, as His most outspoken adversaries could not possibly deny."

These "undeniable proofs" were most eloquently expressed in the changed homes of the people of Haworth. Newton had complained that Grimshaw went to "a people wild and uncultivated like the mountains and rocks which surrounded them." But through the power of the gospel, the lives of the people were lifted to a new level. They enjoyed their religion. Worship and spiritual conversation were a delight. Homes devastated by alcohol and cruelty were restored. Families in which sin had made the most miserable havoc, and in which all the comforts of life were destroyed, now were made happy in the fear of God.

This transformation affected every part of their lives and brought significant social and moral change to the town. Grimshaw himself, answering the accusation that the Methodists attended so many meetings that they had become idle, causing trade and industry to suffer, could say of his parishioners that they were now "more industrious in their trade and other occupations" and that they "maintain their families better than they ever did before."

Still his congregations grew until Grimshaw was often forced to address the people in the expansive graveyard that surrounded the church. From far and near they came, some walking or traveling by horseback as many as 20 miles each Sunday to be under the life-transforming preaching of the Word of God.

Nathaniel Dracup, who lived in Bradford, could often be found among the crowds of worshipers drawn from many miles around to Haworth. Attracted by all he had heard of God's work in this village, Dracup

was also drawn by Grimshaw's unusual gifts as a preacher. He later wrote a tribute in verse that expresses something of the power of the preaching that brought him and many others back again and again to Halworth:

'Twas now his heart ran o'er with peace and joy,
His eyes with tears, and all his sweet employ
Was publishing the Savior's worthy name,
And setting forth the honor of the Lamb.
And now his soul felt sweet angelic fire;
His bosom glowed with love and strong desire,
To seek and save the wandering souls of men
And bring them back to peace and rest again.
He knew the Christ he preached; he never dealt
In the base trade of preaching truths unfelt.⁸

If Grimshaw himself could have read those lines, he no doubt would have been highly displeased at such an effusive portrayal of his ministry. It was the subject, not the manner, of his preaching that mattered to him. As he wrote to his friend William Romaine in 1761, "I live at Haworth when I am at home, and when preaching elsewhere, I am abroad. But at home or abroad, my work is the same: to preach Christ and Him crucified, and to help, through Him, poor sinners to God, grace, and glory."⁹

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