

Chapter 25.

Buying the First Estate in Wales

Mr. and Mrs. Howells arrived home at Christmas, 1920. At the mission headquarters people said they had never seen a couple come on furlough looking so well. “We’ve been having six years’ vacation,” said Mr. Howells, and wanted to start meetings at once!

The Council insisted on at least a few weeks’ rest, but they found even six weeks hard to bear. When the start was made, it was nonstop for three years. Mr. Howells’ testimony of revival created a great stir. Doors opened to him everywhere and there was tremendous blessing; in fact, to hundreds who heard him, it was something unique. The Council of the Mission recognised the Spirit’s working as so unusual that they made him a free lance and asked him to spend five years travelling all over the English-speaking world as God might lead him and taking his testimony to God’s people everywhere.

It was the very thing Rees Howells most wanted to do. “I couldn’t think of any position to compare with that,” he said, “preaching to tens of thousands of people, and the Lord blessing. Before I was converted, I had it in me to travel the world, and gave that up, and here the Lord was giving it back.”

But, once again, the entirely unexpected was to happen. While he was preaching to the large audience at the Llan-drindod Convention of 1922, the power was so great that, although he was the first speaker at one meeting, the chairman, Mr. Head, asked him to make an appeal for full surrender. The whole audience—chairman, speakers, and congregation, rose to their feet. The speaker who was to follow, Rev. G. H. Lunn, said that it would be quite out of place for him to give his address, and the meeting closed.

Immediately afterwards, a minister asked Mr. Howells and several others to join him for prayer. He put before them the fact of so many young people responding to God’s call and the urgent need of more training facilities in

Wales, and he suggested that they ask the Lord for a training college. It never dawned on Mr. Howells that he was to have a part in it. But as they got down to pray, the Lord said to him, “Be careful how you pray. I am going to build a college, and build it through you!”

But one place impressed Mr. Howells more than any other, the Moody Bible Institute. “It was worth going 4,000 miles if only to see that Institute. Of all the sights, that was the greatest.”

It came as such a shock to him that the only thing he could say was, “If You are really speaking to me, confirm it through the Word,” and that night the confirmation came to him through 1 Chronicles 28:20–21, where these three promises stood out before him, “Be strong . . . and do it . . . for the Lord God will be with thee; He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee, until thou hast finished all the work . . . of the house of the Lord”; “There shall be with thee . . . every willing, skilful man, for any manner of service”; and the third from the next chapter (29:4), that the Lord would give him a talent of gold, which from the margin of his Scofield Bible he learned was worth £6,150.

As he and his wife prayed this over, it came as a great test. It meant being called away from the very thing that most appealed to them—a worldwide revival ministry. It also meant new and large financial burdens, for the Lord told them that they would have to do it by faith, whereas in their present work all finances were provided. And worst of all, having left one son to go to Africa, it would now mean leaving hundreds of spiritual children in Africa.

They were preparing to go to America on a private visit, leaving in three days’ time, so they took a bold step. They asked the Lord to seal the new call by sending the very next day the money they would need for the whole trip. It was not an easy request, because there was no reason why people should give them money, knowing they were receiving allowances as missionaries. But the next day the Lord gave them personal gifts amounting to £138, including £50 from a man who had been blessed through Mr. Howells eleven years before, and had told the Lord that if he ever met him again he would give him that sum. The gifts seemed so sacred to them that they gave £100 as a thank-offering to the Mission, just as David poured out the water from the well of Bethlehem before the Lord.

While in America they spoke to many congregations and visited well-known centres, such as the Fulton Street Prayer Meeting in New York. But one place, the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, impressed Mr. Howells more than any other. “It was worth going 4,000 miles if only to see that Institute,” he said. “Of all the sights, that was the greatest. Nine hundred men and women handpicked by God.”

And it was while he was sitting on the platform before speaking that the Lord finally settled the matter of the college for him. He asked him, "Can I build a college like this in Wales?" "Yes, You can," he answered; "You are God." "But what I am to do, I am to do through man. You are going to tell these young people that I came to dwell in you. Can I build that college through you?" "I believed God that second," said Mr. Howells. "The College was built that second!"

On their return home to Brynamman, together they made a final dedication of themselves to the new call. They went up their favourite Black Mountain, and kneeling there, gave themselves over to the Lord to be His instruments to raise up a college. All the money they had between them that day was 16s.!

One sad consequence was that it meant resigning from the Mission, which was a great wrench on both sides. The Council did not want to let them go, and they would not have left the Mission and the co-workers they had learned to love for anything less than a direct command from God.

They had no idea where the College was to be. Like Abraham, they went out not knowing whither they went. In the early summer of that year, 1923, a friend offered them his furnished house for a vacation in a seaside town. They went there expecting to enjoy it, but as soon as they arrived, a curious thing happened. Mr. Howells felt strongly that they should not be there. "I don't know that I ever disliked a place before," he said, "but I told my wife, 'I don't like it here. Let's go to the place my father spoke about—to Mumbles.' I laughed at this, getting a house for nothing and then not wanting it. But the moment we went to Mumbles, I knew it was the place where God wanted us to be." They were in lodgings there for a month, and Mr. Howells spent his time on the cliffs, not to enjoy the sea but to be alone with God, wondering what the next step was to be.

One morning two of his friends, Professor Keri Evans and the Rev. W. W. Lewis, met with him for prayer. Hearing that he did not yet know where the College was to be, Mr. Keri Evans suggested Swansea. Wondering if that could be of the Lord, Mr. Howells made a definite request in prayer: "If Swansea is the place, show me the College before I go to Keswick next week." The answer came back: "I will show you tomorrow."

The next day, as Mr. and Mrs. Howells were walking along the Mumbles Road, which skirts Swansea Bay, they passed a large estate on the rising ground overlooking the bay, and noticed that the house was vacant. They went up to the gate, and found the name of the place to be Glynderwen, and as they stood there, the Lord's word came: "This is the College!"

Mr. Howells continues the story in his own words: “What a mansion it looked to me! I had no idea of the value of such a place, but I supposed it would be worth £10,000; and all the money we had between us was two shillings! I remember the impression it made on me—buying a place like that by faith!

“The gardener informed us that Mr. William Edwards, J.P., the draper, was the owner. The Spirit then told me to ask the Lord for a confirmation in the impossible, as a proof that He had spoken, for when God gives a proof like that, you can be sure that it is He and not man. So I asked Him to send to me within two days a man who knew the owner—and we didn’t know *anyone* in Mumbles!

“What were my feelings the next day? Very mixed, because I knew what it would mean to build a college. If I didn’t get the proof, then I would be free, and could again enjoy the liberty I had had during the past ten years. On the other hand, if the proof came, I would have to commit myself and take up the fight.

“About ten o’clock the following morning, the local minister called. We had attended his chapel the previous Sunday, when he was away, and hearing we were missionaries, he had come to ask us to tea. ‘Do you know Mr. Edwards, the draper?’ I inquired. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘very well.’ That was God! But in a moment a dark cloud came over me, and I knew that I should never be free again until that college was built. Only those who have gone the same way can understand what that meant.

“I called to see Mr. Edwards, but I felt as weak as a man recovering from fever. Oh the burden, the heaviness, the very powers of hell seemed against me! The devil said I was always doing things my own way, with no money and no business training. It seemed as if I hadn’t strength to ring the bell. When I told him why I had come, he said, ‘Other religious people are after the place, but not the same religion as yours. I am going to London today. If you come and see me again, I will consider it.’ But he obviously thought a missionary couldn’t buy such a building! For one thing, he said there was a tavern on the estate, and what would I want with a place like that? What moments they were when I left him! Had I done wrong?

“I went to see the property again next day, and while talking to the gardener, he remarked, ‘The Catholics have bought this house.’ ‘Never!’ I said. Then the Lord told me, ‘That’s why I called you to buy this place. I brought you back from Africa to make a test case for Me with the Church of Rome.’ They had been responsible for the death of six of our best men in Portuguese East Africa; that was my only touch with them, and everything in me was roused against them. I knew they were buying places near every university, and no one was stopping them. I realised the Holy

Spirit was now saying He would never have allowed the Church of Rome to have power again in this country if He had found men to believe Him; and His word to me was plain: 'I shall be very displeased with you if they get this property.'

"In a moment I saw it was a contest with the wealthiest church in the world, and I said, 'But You haven't given me money.' 'Didn't I promise you a talent of gold?' He replied. 'If you believe, go on your knees here and claim this place.' So I knelt down there on the lawn by the little bridge and claimed it, and declared aloud, 'They will never get this property. I take it for the Lord.'"

A few days later Rees Howells spoke to Mr. Edwards again, who asked him a direct question. "If I put these other people off, will you 'close' with me on it?" Mr. Howells knew so little about buying properties that he first had to inquire what that expression meant! He then promised to do so in two weeks, after his return from the Keswick Convention.

While in Keswick, God gave him another marvellous confirmation. An invitation came to preach in Anwoth parish, in southern Scotland. Faced with such a big decision in Swansea they would not have gone but for the definite guidance of the Spirit. But as soon as they arrived in Anwoth, the lady with whom they stayed, Mrs. Stewart, the widow of the former Consul-General in Persia, told them that in front of their bedroom window scores of the Covenanters had been martyred. "That's God," said Mr. Howells, "the guidance is right again, taking us up here against ourselves, as it were."

The following day they were invited to tea with Sir William and Lady Maxwell, at Cardoness House. The first thing he did was to take them to a small room where a framed document hung on the wall. "I am going to show you the most precious deed in Scotland," he said, "—the deed signed by the blood of the Covenanters."

"When he said that," continued Mr. Howells, "I felt my blood run cold. To think that in Glynderwen the Lord had told me He had brought me back to make a test case with the Church of Rome, and here I was face to face with the Covenanters' deed. It is a wonder I remained standing on my feet. There were the signatures scrawled in blood as if with bits of stick. When I saw it, I changed altogether, and there wasn't one thing I wouldn't do to vindicate the Holy Spirit.

"I never felt anything like it before or since. I shed tears that night in my room. I said to the Holy Ghost, 'If it costs my blood, I'll do this for You. If Mr. Edwards asks for £10,000, I'll pay it, and if the Church of Rome puts a match to Glyn-derwen the next day and burns it to ashes, I'll say it is the best investment I ever made.'

"The Spirit of God came on me to fight that church: it was God's anger in me towards the Church of Rome, keeping those five hundred million souls in darkness on the Continent and elsewhere. I entered into a world

where fellowship with people was not to count; the only fellowship was with those martyrs who had laid down their lives for the liberty of the gospel. When I saw that deed, the strength of God came into me and changed my body from clay to steel!”*

When Mr. Howells returned from Keswick, Mr. Edwards made him a definite offer of Glynderwen for £6,300. “I thought he would have asked more than that,” said Mr. Howells, “and meant to accept his offer; but the Lord said, ‘No! It was a talent of gold I promised you—£6,150, and not a penny more.’ I stood against God in a second; I showed my attitude towards Him, but He didn’t say another word and I knew I wouldn’t dare disobey Him.

“When I questioned his price, Mr. Edwards told me to discuss the matter with his solicitor the next day. But instead, I went to a friend’s house in Llanelly, where for two days I neither ate nor drank. What agony I went through, but what lessons I learned!

“I told God that He had called me to fight the Church of Rome, and here He was quibbling over £150; but He turned it back on me. Hadn’t I claimed Glynderwen for Him? Didn’t I believe, then, that the Catholics wouldn’t get it? If the battle had been won in Scotland, could the Holy Ghost ever allow Mr. Edwards to sell the property to anyone else?

“I was beginning to get strong now. Was Mr. Edwards in the hands of the Holy Ghost? Could the devil induce him to sell it? During the two days I came right through, and what liberty I had! Whatever price the enemy offered, he could never get it. I had heard that Mr. Edwards was a great businessman, but I had to learn that God could control him. I came to the place where I knew that whenever God wants to take over a property, the owner has very little to do with it!

“When I returned home I received a letter from Mr. Edwards saying that all negotiations were off. As I had not gone to the solicitor, I had proved that I was not a businessman, and he would sell to the other people, who were offering him £10,000.

“I was not affected by the letter, because the Unseen Captain had taken over, and the responsibility was not mine any longer. I wrote Mr. Edwards and told him quite plainly that it was much harder for me to refuse his offer of £6,300 than to accept it; but God had said I was not to go above £6,150, and after spending two days with Him neither eating nor drinking, He had confirmed His word to me. I had a letter by return, saying he would drop the price £500! He refused to make a single penny on it. Wasn’t that God?”

When the agreement had been signed, Mr. Howells had ten days in which to pay the deposit. On the day he was due to go to the solicitor with the money, he was £140 short. He was still short this sum when the

actual hour arrived, so in faith he set off to the office without it. He hadn't been there long when Mrs. Howells arrived. She had followed him down with the post, and in it were three checks, which made up the £140 to the penny!

But the real battle came over the full sum to be paid. He had never dealt in large amounts before, and the burden was great upon him. He was to take no meetings, nor make any appeals. His eyes were to be on God alone. He gave himself to prayer, spending his days in his little upstairs bedroom in his mother's home, alone with God and His Word from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., when he took his first meal. In the evenings he continued in prayer with his newly found prayer-partner, Mr. Tommy Howells. Ten months were spent in this way until the victory was complete.

It was during this time that God established for him the principles of faith in finance which were to govern all his future large-scale dealings in the purchase of properties, and their upkeep. At that time, George Müller was the only man he knew of who had done the same thing before—with no council, no denomination, not making his needs known, and shut in with God alone. Mr. Howells found him a very great help in proving that the promises of God were reliable to step out on. Indeed he said that the only two books which he found could help him through this critical period were the Bible and Müller's autobiography. He was often encouraged by thinking, "It must be true, because Müller did it." He was determined not to go beyond what Müller did, which was not to buy or build until he had three-quarters of the money.

But in his daily pleadings with the Lord for the promised talent of gold, the Spirit reminded him of something else—the book of Haggai. When the Jews had begun to build the second temple, and the work had stopped through the accusations of their enemies, the Lord through Haggai told them to go on and build, though they were in great poverty. It was then God said to them: "The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine" (Hag. 2:8). When they began to build on the strength of that promise, in faraway Babylon God stirred King Darius to look up the records of what Cyrus had promised them, and to send them all they needed (Ezra 6).

After facing Rees Howells with this passage, the Lord said, "If you believe I am the owner of the silver and gold, as you build I will give you whatever is needed." In other words, the Lord was leading His servant differently from Müller. He was not to wait until he had three-quarters of the money, but he was to go straight ahead and not expect a deliverance from God today for a need of tomorrow. The Lord had taught him years before in small things that "the promises of God are equal to current coin" and that, therefore, he must act on the promises as he would if he actually had the cash.

But he never thought he would be called to apply it on this large scale! It meant many severe tests, and he did not hesitate to use normal business methods of advances from the bank when guided to do so. But the proof that God has been with His servant in this way as He was with George Müller in another is that there are no debts or mortgages today on estates whose present value is about £100,000.

But to return to the purchase of Glynderwen. The next sum asked for was £2,000. The Lord sent gifts varying from 5s. to £300 during the next three months, but when he still only had £1,700, the solicitor suddenly called for it to be paid by eleven o'clock the next morning. At first he was baffled a bit, as to why the Lord had allowed this sudden demand to be made. He was walking down Wind Street in Swansea, and as he came under the bridge the word came to him, "Trust ye in the Lord forever, for in the Lord Jehovah are everlasting resources." It was a word from heaven to him, and he believed that by eleven o'clock the next morning he would be passing back under that bridge having the money with him. Rees had a train to catch, and finding an empty carriage, he got down on his knees and praised the Lord. He could have danced for joy!

The next morning he had the £300! The woman who sent it told him afterwards that she had a great burden for him during the very same half-hour that he believed. It was so heavy on her that she had to close her shop and post the money off to him. He was able to pay the £2,000 that day with £18 left!

Glynderwen had been the home of Sir Charles Eden, an uncle of the Right Honourable Anthony Eden. The estate consisted of a mansion and eight acres of land, also the tavern. The property had been laid out in lawns, gardens and a tennis court with a lovely view of Swansea Bay and Mumbles.

During the testing days, before the £2,000 was paid, an offer came to buy from Mr. Howells the tavern and four acres of land attached to it. No new liquor license had been granted in Swansea for many years, so the license alone was worth over £1,000, and acceptance would have supplied the extra money needed at that time. It was the first serious temptation in finance to take an easy way of deliverance.

But there was no possibility of compromise on principle. The offer was turned down, the tavern closed, and the value of the pub license forfeited. Also, the licensee was compensated for clearing out. Fair is fair to all—saints and publicans alike! Then by the addition of eight rooms, the pub itself was converted into a men's dormitory.

The whole property was placed in the hands of three trustees, who stood together in this venture of faith: they were the late Rev. W. W. Lewis, a well-known and respected minister in Swansea; Mr. Henry

Griffiths, who was then the confidential clerk of the Great Mountain Colliery Company, and later a Group Accountant of the National Coal Board; and the third was Rees Howells.

Mr. Edwards, the former owner, became very friendly with Mr. Howells, and in later years gave gifts to the work. He confided, "I couldn't sell the property to anyone else." When the completed account was received, with about twenty items on it (including the solicitor's charges and the sum paid to the licensee of the tavern), the total came to £6,150 7s. 4d.—a talent of gold plus 7s. 4d.!

The opening of the College was on Whitmonday, 1924, and crowds came to hear the story of what God had done during that great period of commercial embarrassment and scarcity of money. About a thousand people gathered.

"I remember how God tested me," recalled Mr. Howells. "We hadn't a tent or a building then sufficient to hold a crowd, and the meetings would have to be in the open air. It had been raining nearly all the week before. I had ordered hundreds of chairs from the Corporation. On Sunday I had the victory that the Whitmonday would be fine. It was a perfect day. I told the people there would not be a drop of rain till they arrived home that day."

One of the future tutors of the College, a Greek and Hebrew scholar, the Rev. Llynfi Davies, M.A., B.D., testified later how he had come down to that meeting a modernist and went back a believer!

Failing to find any committee or religious body behind it, the press called it "God's College"—an appropriate title!