
THE BIRTH OF A PROPHET



Walter and Lucy Ravenhill home at 53 Bewerly St, Leeds, 1907
(2nd door from left)



Leeds, England is one of the fastest growing cities in the British Isles, an urban center of over seven hundred thousand people, with a population of two to three million in the greater Leeds region. Set in West Yorkshire, approximately 3 hours north of London, it is the second largest metropolitan district in Great Britain.

The recorded history of Leeds dates back to the fifth century. During the twelfth century the village was nothing more than a small agricultural market center. It evolved from a small market town in the River Aire valley in the sixteenth century into a major manufacturing center by the end of the eighteenth century, with almost half of England's exports passing through the town.

It was in the early years of the twentieth century that a newly married couple in Leeds began their life together. Walter Ravenhill brought his new wife Lucy to their two-story house at 53 Bewerly Street in Hunslet, Leeds. Times were difficult, wages were low, and the work was hard and scarce. But Walter found a job at a steel company and the Ravenhills were ready for the challenge that all newly-weds have in beginning their journey together.

Someone tracing the Ravenhill family history believed that Walter was born in the small English shire of Oakham, Rutlandshire. But the 1911 census of the city of Leeds reveals he was actually born in

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1877 in Chelsea near London. Lucy, three years older than Walter, was born in Saltburn, Yorkshire in 1874. Her family met Walter when he traveled back to the south of England from Scotland. He had lost his job with the household staff of the Duke of Argyle, due possibly to drinking problems. He got off the train in Leeds and ended up providentially as a boarder in the house of his future mother-in-law.

While living there he met Lucy and they fell in love. When Walter later proposed marriage, Lucy's mother was opposed to the relationship, but Lucy said she felt the Lord had shown her that he would be converted. Though seemingly an unwise choice at the time on her part, they were indeed brought together by the hand of providence.

Family history indicates they probably married in 1902 when Walter was twenty-five and Lucy twenty-eight. After two years of marriage their daughter Annie was born. The Leeds' birth records reveal there were eventually three children born to Walter and Lucy, but the third child died at birth or very soon after.

It was during another pregnancy three years later in 1907 that Lucy sang to and prayed for the baby boy in her womb. Her mother, also named Annie, prayed for the baby soon to be born. On June 18, 1907, a midwife delivered Leonard at home, bathed and dressed him, then quietly left the room, leaving mother and child together.

Len's mother told him twenty years later that after the midwife left the room, she laid her hands on him and prayed, "Lord, make this boy a preacher or don't let him live." She then dressed and went to the weekly prayer meeting, taking baby Len with her. So Leonard attended his first prayer meeting when he was two hours old. It was this kind of atmosphere in which Leonard Ravenhill was born.

MOTHER'S AND GRANDMOTHER'S GODLINESS

The Ravenhill home at the time was a religious mixture of light and darkness. Lucy was the only Christian in the house, as Walter was an unconverted Catholic. She was a devout Christian and a praying woman. Though Walter did not go to church, Lucy was strong enough to not compromise her faith. Her godly mother Annie, who lived down the street, was a great example and encouragement to her.

Their lives provided Leonard early impressions of the reality of God, beginning in his earliest years. Lucy often took him down the street to his grandmother's cottage. During private times of prayer, Annie would pull her long apron over her head and sing, "*Take time to be holy, speak oft with Thy Lord; spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.*"

As he grew, Len became intrigued by his grandmother's behavior. Every day possible, he went down the street to her cottage. There he was exposed to her faith and heard her sing the great Methodist hymns. He later realized she had memorized almost the entire Methodist hymnbook:

I used to be with my Granny Annie who sat in the corner or by the chimney. She rocked and swayed, and used to sing *Take Time to be Holy* or *Trust and Obey*. I'd sneak in the back of the house and just sit and listen to her. She had one of those enormous colored skirt aprons, and would take it and throw it over her head and shut everything out. She would sit in the chair and rock, singing for hours. The influence of my grandmother affected my mother and the influence of my mother came on me.¹

¹ The reader will notice that many primary quotes by Leonard Ravenhill are not footnoted. All footnoted quotes by Ravenhill are from his published writings. All non-footnoted quotes are from his unpublished autobiographical writings and his sermons from 1932 to 1994, most of which do not include locations and dates. The accuracy of all quoted material has been maintained throughout the book.

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This was the spiritual climate that brought about Leonard's first awareness of God. He sensed what he called a holy atmosphere. Regarding his mother, he said:

You know what my mother did while I was still in the womb? She sang. She was always singing for joy because I was coming along soon. She had a beautiful voice and oh, how she used to sing! I loved to hear her sing. The result was that I loved to sing. For three of the years that I traveled with my evangelistic team, I never preached once. I just sang, sang, and sang. I loved to sing.

My daddy was a hellfire preacher, though not ordained by any church. I thank God for my daddy, but my mother's life influenced me more than my father because mother had more time at home with me.

WALTER'S CONVERSION

The second major spiritual influence on Leonard was his father's conversion at the age of thirty-five when Len was five years old. Walter's parents were from Oakham near Leicester, half way between Leeds and London. The couple managed a two-hundred year old tavern in the center of town and a stable for hunters' horses. Tavern life had a corrupting influence on Walter. He became a regular drinker by the age of fourteen and was completely controlled by it by the age of twenty-four. His life was now dominated by alcohol and a heavy smoking habit. One of his prize possessions was a large collection of handmade smoking pipes, which he had by the time Leonard was five years old.

One morning Len noticed all his father's pipes were gone and he ran to his mother, telling her someone had stolen them. "No, dear, Father took all his pipes and tobacco and gave them to the Lord last night." Walter had been wonderfully converted to Christ.

The providence of God brought his salvation to pass in 1912 when a Welsh preacher named David Matthews came to Leeds. Matthews became well known later for his book, *I Saw the Welsh Revival*, which is a firsthand account of the 1904-1905 Welsh Revival. Matthews had been one of the preachers during the awakening, which was primarily under the leadership of young Evan Roberts.

Matthews took the train from Wales to Leeds on a Saturday afternoon. When he arrived at the main station, he looked across the square and saw a large building, one of the more prestigious churches in town. Not knowing if he would find anyone there, he walked to the church and was greeted by the janitor. He listened eagerly as Matthews told him of the Welsh revival and replied, "We've heard about the revival—it's wonderful."

Through unknown circumstances, the well-known Matthews was invited to preach at the church on Sunday. His preaching overflowed with passion and energy. At the end of the service, the leaders asked him to leave, as it was a Unitarian church.

Matthews could have gone to ten different places, but providentially he went up Dewsbury Road. There he saw the large United Methodist Church building, where he ended up preaching for a period. Walter finally agreed to go with Lucy to hear Matthews preach and he was converted to Christ. Walter then went home, threw all his pipes into the fireplace, and stopped drinking altogether. For him, it was radical repentance from all he knew was sinful. Walter Ravenhill was a changed man. Old things passed away and all things became new.

Leonard now had a godly mother and father who profoundly influenced him for eternal good. He reflected later on the change in their home:

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Mother saw a total transformation in my father; everything turned around and the whole house was transformed. I then had both a godly mother and father. There is no way I can express the influence my home life had on me with a praying daddy and a singing mother. Father had such a radical transformation. The Bible says that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. It was true of my father—he had a new vocabulary and new interests. He was a giant of a guy, yet was so gentle and his transformation was also gentle. He did not care about sports anymore and had no desire for his old habits of drinking, smoking, or anything of his old life. Now Christ was his life.

The Ravenhill family attended the Methodist New Connexion Church in Leeds. One day Lucy said, “Lenny, polish your shoes and lay out your best clothes; we’re going to church tonight.” “But Mummy, it’s not Sunday, it’s Monday.” “Well, someone is preaching at church that Father loves very much—David Matthews.” As they entered the sanctuary, Matthews was in the pulpit singing:

*Wounded for me, wounded for me,
There on the cross he was wounded for me.*

Matthews finished the hymn, waving his hand to the sky as he sang:

*One day to earth, he is coming for me,
Gone my transgressions, and now I am free,
All because Jesus was wounded for me.*

Walter Ravenhill became good friends with Matthews. Soon the social and spiritual atmosphere of their home was wonderfully changed. They kept the Lord’s Day holy and attended three services each Sunday. It was a joy, not drudgery. Leonard was transfixed

with the singing and the preaching. He had never heard anyone ministering the Word of God in the power of the Spirit.

The fragrance of such early experiences remained with him permanently. Leonard had fond memories of the consistent fellowship his family had with other believers. Being with the church in their meetings was not optional for them. The family also used their vacations to attend Christian conferences. Hearing good preaching became a family priority. Leonard often reflected on simple memories of their home life:

I remember one night I'd been to a fish and chip shop at the top of our street; they always opened at night with the leftovers from the night before. They'd throw them in the boiling oil and you got a fish for a penny and a half of one for half a penny. If my mother felt good, she'd give me a half penny for a half of fish. Sometimes she got generous and gave me a whole penny, and I'd go for fish and chips.

There were good influences in Leonard's early life, particularly during his school years in the English schools. He attended the Cross Flats Council School in Leeds until he was thirteen. School attendance was compulsory at the age of five in England in those days. The importance and power of the Scriptures were instilled early in his life, not only at home and at church, but in school as well. The first thing he was taught in public school was the Ten Commandments. At the end of each week, the teacher assigned Bible memory work: "Remember on Monday I want you to quote half of Psalm Eight or the Twenty-Third Psalm."

Regarding the influence of his parents, grandmother, and David Matthews' preaching, Leonard said:

It was just as though you put a brick down, then another, and then another. I was learning about God first from my mother and

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grandmother, sensing the presence of God while listening to them pray and sing, which was something out of this world. Then my father's pipes were gone and the change in his life was evident. I then had this confrontation with God's presence through David Matthews.

As Leonard saw the reality of Christianity, at times he felt resistant because of the holiness of God:

I used to fear going to meetings with my father when I was young. One old godly man used to pray, "Come Lord, and walk in our midst." I would think, "I hope He doesn't," because I was scared to death that He would.

If Leonard saw godliness in his mother and grandmother, he also observed it in the daily lifestyle of his father. By age seven Leonard said to his father, "Daddy, take me to the army," referring to the street meetings of the Salvation Army. Along with the Salvation Army workers, the Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and other groups were all witnessing on the streets. Because of such times, Len remembered his father's eternal perspective and passion in the things of Christ:

In his early days my daddy moved among the high society in England with dukes, lords, and ladies. I remember this being discussed once at dinner. At the castle where he lived, the king used to come at different times. My daddy said, "I'm glad I wasn't born into high society like that." When someone asked why, he said, "Because all the years I was there, I never heard the gospel. They live in that artificial realm of, 'We've got everything.' It was all show and style—'Our yacht is bigger than your yacht. Our castle and estate are bigger than yours.' And they never once put anything out in the way of the gospel to the family that met around the table."

I'm glad my daddy came out of that. He was the first to challenge me about the Christian life. There were never any sports

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magazines in our house. All the literature in the house was spiritual. I was always reading something about a missionary in a distant land. I read one day about someone in Japan with the Japan Rescue Mission and then about someone in the Congo. All the books on our shelves were books of spiritual matters because Daddy set these things before us.

He not only told us truth, but he also lived it. He would put on a ragged coat on Saturday nights and go down by the tavern, waiting until men came staggering out, then would put his arm in theirs and would take them in the basement of the church and share with them the love of Christ. We had no automobile and yet Daddy would go again and again, and I'd say, "Where has Daddy gone?" "Oh, he met a man last night he's helping." Then he'd bring the man into church dirty, scruffy and disreputable. My dad would then go see him during the week, and he'd go for him the next Saturday night and the next Saturday night. After about two or three weeks, the man came with a clean shirt and a new suit, and I'd say, "Well, who was the man you came with tonight, Daddy?"

"Oh, it's the man I came with last week."

"No, no, you came with a nice man tonight, not the ragged, dirty, smelly man with the rags clothing."

"But it's the same man. You see, that's what Jesus does when he comes into a life."

As Walter took Leonard to hear preachers and missionaries, the experiences were significant in shaping Len's life:

Father took me to hear C. T. Studd, considered by many in that day the greatest cricket player in England during his university days. Years later I often preached a service in a big Air Force field in England during World War II, and over in the distance, there was

a big castle—a beautiful place with a race course outside. It was the home where Studd was raised, his father's ancestral home.

My dad was a great admirer of C. T. Studd. A missions' magazine came into our home every month and I read it. They never failed to put in the famous words of Studd: "If Jesus be God and died for me, then there is no sacrifice too great for me to make for him."

Studd gave his life completely to the Lord Jesus Christ and went on to have three separate missionary careers, sailing with the Cambridge Seven to China, then to India to work among the opium addicts, and then at age fifty-six, into the interior of Africa to establish the African Inland Mission, which later became the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade. Father took me one day to hear Studd preach. He also told me about the Salvation Army, and I just remember faintly seeing a man with a beard who I'm sure now was William Booth.

I remember other men who came along, like Paget Wilkes who founded mission organizations. As I heard them, I was stirred in my heart.

The effect of Walter's evangelistic zeal was evident to all. After his conversion he spent almost every Sunday afternoon for thirty years visiting the sick at the Leeds hospital. Because he had been a faithful Roman Catholic all his life, he was particularly successful in reaching Catholics. One day a man listened to Walter's testimony and bitterly replied, "I have prayed to God and He did not hear me—why?"

Walter replied, "Suppose the king of our country came into this room right now and I asked him for five pounds, would the king give it to me? After all, I'm a loyal subject of the crown."

The man thought a moment and said, "I don't suppose he would."

“Well then, suppose that after I asked the king and had been refused, the Prince of Wales came in and asked for the same thing. Would he get the money?” “Oh, yes, because he’s the king’s son.”

Walter said, “Exactly right. Relationship makes all the difference.”

A leading actor from India was performing in the biggest theater in town. One afternoon between performances he listened to evangelistic street preaching. He was so impressed that he asked for help. He had been raised as a Sikh and still wore a turban. Immediately he said, “I don’t have this which you are speaking of; what is it?” The gospel was fully explained to him, and he came to Christ that evening.

David Matthews preached in Leeds regularly and Leonard heard him a number of times. It was through hearing Matthews that Len first had the desire to be a preacher, even before becoming a Christian.

THE IMPACT OF METHODISM

John Wesley records in his journal that he preached in Hunslet and Leeds during the last week of August, 1769.² He was there again twelve years later in 1781, preaching to a crowd of at least a thousand people.³ After the 1770’s it is likely that Wesley was not allowed to preach inside a church building in the north of England.

Much of his ministry in all likelihood would have taken place in the streets or the open fields. He certainly had a tremendous ministry all over the north of England, as the early Methodist preachers spread the gospel consistently, even in the hardest of circumstances.

² John Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 4, (London: ed. by Joseph Benson, 1810), p. 414.

³ Historical Society for Leeds and District (est. 1889)

<http://www.thoresby.org.uk/chronology.htm>

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Eighteenth century Wesleyan Methodist history shows that Leeds was a primary center of the Methodist New Connexion.⁴ Derek Fraser affirms that Leeds was “a hotbed of radical Methodism” within six years after Wesley’s death.⁵ Before his death John Wesley had established a Tuesday night class in Leeds that lasted for almost a hundred years until the latter part of the nineteenth century. The class was revived immediately after the 1904-1905 Welsh Revival.

This is the class Leonard was attending, which by this time was known as the Leeds Holiness Mission. Whenever David Matthews was in town, he would attend himself. Leonard loved the Tuesday night classes and times of prayer. To the end of his life he treasured the Moroccan leather-bound Methodist hymnbook he and his sister used in the meetings. He especially remembered the fervent singing: “You’ve never heard such singing in your life! Nobody in the world can sing like Yorkshire people,” that of course, being the strong opinion of a Yorkshire man!

Ravenhill’s spiritual life, marked by experiential godliness, was from its beginning rooted in eighteenth century English Methodism. His grandmother, mother, and father had all been converted to Christ through the influence of that spiritual heritage. It was also on Tuesday nights at the Leeds Holiness Mission class that Leonard saw radiant Christianity lived out. The meetings were alive with the power of God, as they sang such hymns as Charles Wesley’s *And Can It Be That I Should Gain an Interest in the Savior’s Blood?* Even as an unsaved teenager, no one had to tell Leonard that God was real. It could not be denied, as the reality was reflected in the faces of the believers Leonard was around.

⁴ George Smith, *A History of Methodism* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862, 2nd ed.), nd, n.p.

⁵ Derek Fraser, *A History of Modern Leeds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 264.

Walter especially loved the spirit and heart of the Salvation Army, and Leonard grew to love and respect them as well. Their work in taking the gospel to the worst and poorest of society was amazing in those years. Leonard later recalled:

In my twenties, during a period of pastoring, I loved to go past the Salvation Army building, which was the largest one outside of London. There's a huge block of stone at the front. Chiseled in one stone it says, "William Booth of the Salvation Army opened this corps", and then it gives the date of 1910. In a second stone it says, "Kate and Mary Jackson, officers in this corp."

It was in this poor city, where they spin and weave cotton into cloth and the whole town was on the poverty level, that Kate and Mary Jackson labored for a couple of years and nothing happened. Those girls worked diligently and went to bed exhausted at night.

So they wrote William Booth: "Would you kindly move us to another station? We're so tired and disheartened. We've tried everything that we've been taught to do. Please move us to another location."

Booth sent a telegram back with two words—"Try tears." They did and they saw real revival come. Those girls went to travailing prayer—not just prayer, but travailing prayer, prayer with anguish in it. The road to revival is often paved with tears and brokenness.

In looking back on his youth, Leonard knew that God had preserved him for his own divine purposes. The time was growing near when those purposes would unfold more clearly to him as he walked in the light he had been given.