



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Prayer and Revival

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(*Mr Colley is a pastor in Alabama, U.S.A. and this message was given last year at a Baptist Conference in the United States.*)

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Introduction

My subject is 'Prayer and Revival.' The assignment as I understand it is to explore the relationship of the prayers of the people of God and the outbreak of revival. Does prayer play any role in bringing about revival? Does the concentrated prayer of an individual or a group always precede special movements of God that we call revival? Is a prayer-less revival an exception?

Prayer Not Always a Precursor to Revival

The Bible presents an exception to the rule. A city of Gentiles, Nineveh, was guilty of wickedness that had garnered the attention of God Himself to warrant a direct visitation in judgment by Him. 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,' cried the reluctant messenger, Jonah. There is no evidence that the people of Nineveh prayed to Jehovah for what transpired or that they even knew Him well enough to cry in faith to Him. But, revival (some may call it reformation) came. See Jonah 3:4-10.

Another example will suffice to show that revival, as always, is a sovereign act of God and when and how He brings it about is entirely up to Him. The church at Jerusalem numbering about 120 were obediently waiting as their Lord had instructed. We strongly suspect that they were praying, for Acts 1:14 tells us that before this time they 'continued with one accord in prayer and supplication' but we are not told that their desire or expectation was for revival. We have no indication that they expected the Lord to do what He did precisely on the day of Pentecost. But, without concentrated corporate prayer for revival the Lord sent His Spirit and the result was about 3,000 souls gladly received the Word of God, were baptised and added to the church in one day.

Prayer for Revival Just May Be Answered

Prayer is, though, a means the Lord uses to accomplish His purposes. At times He prompts His people to pray for that which already is His purpose including revival. He made very specific promises to His people Israel of what He would do for and within them. 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh' (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

He then concludes, 'Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be enquired of by the



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house of Israel, to do it for them' (Ezekiel 36:37). If the Lord is pleased to prompt His people to pray for revival what can we say about the subject of prayer?

Preacher Praying is Indispensable

Some have said that the prayer of the preacher is most important for revival. 'There are plenty of preachers who will preach and deliver great and eloquent addresses on the need of revival and the spread of the kingdom of God, but not many there are who will do that without which all preaching and organizing are worse than vain - pray. It is out of date, almost a lost art, and the greatest benefactor this age could have is the man who will bring the preachers and the Church back to prayer' (E M Bounds).

It is said that George Whitefield prayed, 'Give me souls or take my life.'

Prayer will Consume Time

Our Lord would spend all night in prayer. He would arise a great while before day and pray. Samuel prayed all night. The economy of the Christian life is important. In the matter of financial resources we try to ensure that our scarce funds are spent to get the most value for them. The most necessary things like food and shelter are the highest on our list of non-negotiable spend items. As believers, how we use the scarce resource of time allotted to us is most important. For the preacher his time can be absorbed in matters of lesser importance to the detriment of the work of God. An example of this is found early in church history. 'And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-4).

Please note the order of priority – 'to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word.' The saints at Jerusalem in their entirety were pleased with this and chose out seven men to serve while the apostles used their time more wisely.

What resulted? 'And the Word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7).

Preachers rightly love to study God's Word and read books that will help them in the presentation of God's truth to His people. Prayer is such a necessary component of effective, heaven-sent preaching and ministering that to ignore it or put it in a lesser place of importance is a sure road to less than God's best. 'Tried this morning specially to pray against idols in the shape of my books and studies. These encroach upon my direct communion with God, and need to be watched' (Andrew Bonar, September 17, 1850).

Robert Murray McCheyne, the Scottish preacher, was conversant in Hebrew, wrote his diary in Latin to keep private matters secluded from most prying eyes, but was pre-eminently a man of preaching and prayer. It is said of him that he was offered places of duty of far larger scope than where he served. He turned them all down because where he was he was afforded more time to pray. After his death a visitor was being led on a tour of his study and pulpit by an elderly man who knew him and sat under his ministry. He told the visitor, who may have desired to be like McCheyne in certain ways, to sit down at his



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study desk. 'Put your elbows on the table, put your head in your hands, now let the tears flow; that is the way Mr McCheyne used to do,' said the sexton. He then took him to the pulpit and followed the same course. Preacher praying is important.

Church Praying Is Important

Godly men have testified that especial movements of God where they have ministered have come after the Lord's people made it a special object of concerted, united prayer. English preacher, Sidlow Baxter, when he was eighty-five years of age, said, 'I have pastored only three churches in my more than sixty years of ministry. We had revival in every one. And not one of them came as a result of my preaching. They came as a result of the membership entering into a covenant to pray until revival come. And it did come, every time.'

Dr A T Pierson once said, 'There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer.'

'United prayer is useful inasmuch as God has promised extraordinary and special blessings in connection with it, 'For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matthew 18:20). 'If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father Which is in heaven' (Matthew 18:19). God asks for agreement, and, once the saints agree, He pledges Himself that the prayer of His agreeing ones shall be answered. Why, see what accumulated force there is in prayer, when one after another pours out their passionate desires; when many seem to be tugging at the rope; when many seem to be knocking at mercy's gate; when the mighty cries of many burning hearts come up to heaven. When, my beloved, you go and shake the very gates of heaven with the powerful battering-ram of holy passion, and sacred insistence, then will the kingdom of heaven forcefully advance. When first one, and then another, and yet another, throws their whole soul into the prayer, the kingdom of heaven is conquered and the victory is very great indeed' (Charles Spurgeon).

The Lord made it clear that united prayer that He directs yields answers from heaven. 'Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father Which is in heaven (Matthew 18:19). The Greek word for 'agree' is that from which we get our word 'symphony.' A symphony is a collection of artists playing their respective instruments. They are under the direction of one maestro and play one piece of music. You might say that the maestro leads the musicians to a harmonious rendering of the music. In such a way the Lord as the maestro prompts here one and then another to pray along the same lines to accomplish His purposes. History has recorded more than one example of revivals resulting from two, then three, then many praying for it. The Layman's Prayer Revival of 1857-1858 began when Jeremiah Lanphier started a prayer meeting in New York. Six attended the first. Later it was reported that 10,000 attended in one locality and then across the country similar events occurred.

What Moves One to Pray for Revival

The need for revival may be personal, church or societal. The promptings to earnestly pray for it may result from many reasons.



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Prayer the Response to Desperation

Prayer may result from a sense of distance from the Lord and desperation for the distance to be removed: 'To the chief Musician, Maschil, for the sons of Korah. As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance. O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar' (Psalm 42:1-6).

Prayers of Desperation May Result from Dangerous Circumstances and lead to great things

'And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto Thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak Thy Word, by stretching forth Thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the Name of Thy holy child Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the Word of God with boldness ... and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all' (Acts 4:29-33).

Prayer for Revival May Result from Assurance That It Will Be Heard

If one is not assured that their prayers are heard and answered then one is reluctant to go through the exercise. If one sees no value in what they do then the sane man will cease doing it. For the believer the initial impulse of life is to pray, 'Abba, Father.' This impulse is God-given with the understanding that prayer is the child crying out to his Father Who alone can sustain and help. It is not like an atheist who once attempted to belittle prayer by saying that one could take a stone, place it in front of them, pray to it and get as much response as praying to God: yes, no, or maybe. The Lord places before His people examples of those who know the efficacy of prayer. I have no doubt the disciples saw the value of prayer in the life of our Lord. They would marvel at His stamina, the result of 'meat to eat that ye know not of' resulting from His prayer life. They would seek for instruction on prayer, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples' to pray (Luke 11:1). Why do so if they had not seen that the Father heard and answered the prayers of His Son?

We are Commanded to Pray. We are Encouraged to Pray.

'Call unto Me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not' (Jeremiah 33:3).

Praying in a Believing Manner has Assurances.

'And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive' (Matthew 21:22).

'And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he



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have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him' (James 5:15).

Prayers of a Righteous Man that are Fervent and Effectual Accomplish Much (and Revival is Much)

'Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit' (James 5:16-18).

The Largeness of the Petition Should be no Impediment to Pray

In the words of John Newton, 'Come, my soul, thy suit prepare: Jesus loves to answer prayer; He Himself has bid thee pray, therefore will not say thee nay. Thou art coming to a King, large petitions with thee bring; for His grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much.'

The Place of Prayer May Be Important

A preacher acquaintance of mine who is now with the Lord had a ministry that was singularly blessed of the Lord. He was a strong believer in the importance of the Lord's church. He believed and observed how that many times the Lord met with His people at a particular location. Gathering that the location had been set aside for the Lord's visitations he remarked that if he had an especial burden to pray about that he would make his way to the church building to offer up his prayers and supplications.

Moses was a great intercessor. The place where he sought the LORD was important to him. Those like minded were encouraged to come with him to pray. 'And Moses took the tabernacle, and pitched it without the camp, afar off from the camp, and called it the Tabernacle of the congregation (*Place of Meeting*). And it came to pass, that every one which sought the LORD went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp. And it came to pass, when Moses went out unto the tabernacle, that all the people rose up, and stood every man at his tent door, and looked after Moses, until he was gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man in his tent door' (Exodus 33:7-10).

History has examples where two or more were prompted to meet in a particular location specifically to pray for an especial movement of God and their prayers after a time were answered.

For What Should We Pray?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in 'Revival' (pages 174-186), pointed his hearers and readers to Exodus 33:12-17 for instruction on what to pray about to lead to a powerful manifestation of God's presence among His people.

In that passage we glean that Moses saw the need for the following: (1) There is a need for assurance of the way in order that the Lord may be known (verse 13). This the Lord answered with the promise of His presence (verse 14). (2) There is a need for assurance that the Lord is uniquely among His people so that others may know (verse 16). The Lord



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responded He would do that very thing (verse 17).

Our prayer for God's especial movement among His people should at least contain these components. Who among us would not say that we need assurances from heaven that of all the people who meet in the Name of Christ that somewhere, somehow clarity is needed so that the world would know the true from the false?

Conclusion

We may never feel at liberty to limit the Lord to any particular formula for bringing about His powerful movements among men. His ways are far higher than ours. But, where we see evidence of some cause and effect in the Bible and repeated, verified acts in history where the cause and effect cycle occurs we should not dismiss it either. It matters not if we have personally experienced revival. If we sense the need for it, may that be the impulse from heaven to pray for it? If He is prompting to pray, does not that mean He intends to provide?

'Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the Kingdom. If you may have everything by asking in His Name, and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is' (Charles Spurgeon).