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Reformation
& Revival



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The place of prayer in every true revival of religion is as much logical as theological. If revival is a sovereign work of God, as we declare it to be, then the calling of the people of God in relation to revival is to pray for it. In that sense, prayer is fundamental to revival both biblically and historically.

But it is important at the beginning of our thinking on this theme to see the danger of making a false connection between prayer and revival, in which we could easily fall into the kind of error Charles G. Finney exemplified. He said that it was possible for God's people to have a revival at any time or place simply by fulfilling certain conditions. We can find ourselves thinking that prayer is a lever which inevitably produces revival, so that all we need to do if we want to see a revival is arrange a concert of prayer (as they did in the eighteenth century) or all-night prayer meetings (as people have done at other times), and revival will come.

That is a form of the antiquarian fallacy which sees that before any extraordinary work of grace in history, God's people were put to prayer in an extraordinary way. From this we wrongly conclude that if we do as they did, we will experience what they experienced as a matter of course.

Calvin Colton, an American minister of the last century, wrote quite properly in his book, *The History and Character of American Revivals*:

A revival is a special and manifest outpouring of the Spirit of God when the work no longer labors in the hands of men but seems to be taken up by God Himself, and the people are then seen rushing in unwonted crowds and under the deepest solemnity to the house of prayer.

The proper connection between prayer and revival is also expressed by Jonathan Edwards in his *Thoughts on Revival*:

It is God's will that the prayers of His saints should be one great and principal means of carrying on the designs of Christ's kingdom in the world. When God has very great things to accomplish in His church, it is His will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of His people, as is manifest in Ezekiel 36:37: "I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them." And it is revealed that when God is about to do great things for His church, he will begin by remarkably pouring out the spirit of grace and supplication (Zech. 12:10).

Special prayer for revival is therefore a spirit that God pours out upon His people. It results from a new zeal for God's honor and glory manifested in His church and a recognition that He alone is able to deal with the often moribund condition in which we live.

The Work of Prayer

When God is about to do a remarkable work the universal pattern is, in the words of Robert Murray McCheyne, that He persuades people to take up "the work of prayer." Although we recognize God's sovereignty in revival, as in all else, we also recognize that a true understanding of God's sovereignty does not encourage human lethargy. The response of the people of God to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is not to shrug their shoulders but to supplicate the throne of God fervently.

Professor O. Hallesby, in his little book titled simply *Prayer*, has these striking words:

We long for revivals. We speak of revivals. We work for revivals, and we even pray a little for them. But we do not enter upon that labor in prayer which is the essential preparation for every revival. The work of the Spirit can be compared to mining. The Spirit's work is to blast to pieces the sinner's hardness of heart and his frivolous opposition to God. The period of the awakening can be likened to the time when the blasts are fired. The time between the

awakenings correspond, on the other hand, to the time when the deep holes are being bored with great effort into the hard rock. To bore these holes is hard and difficult work, a task which tries one's patience. To light the fuse and fire the shot is not only easy but very interesting work. One sees results from such work. It creates interest. Shots sound and pieces fly in every direction. But it takes trained workmen to do the boring. Anybody can light the fuse.

We need to learn a great deal more about the work that is involved in prayer. Prayer is the essence of the work to which God calls us. We frequently speak about praying for the work, but essentially it is prayer which is the real work. There is no harder or more demanding ministry to which God calls us.

The best way to approach this theme is to consider a biblical example of a man pleading with God for the reviving of His cause. It is in the Psalms that we find these pleas most frequently. Sometimes they are very brief: "Rise up and help us" (Ps. 44:26); "Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You?" (Ps. 85:6); "Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!" (Ps. 14:7). Throughout the whole of the Psalter we find God putting such longings into the hearts of people. Here and there we find special pleas for revival. Psalm 44 is one such. In this Psalm arguments are heaped up and reach a crescendo in the burning appeal of verse 23: "Awake, O Lord! Why do You sleep? Rouse Yourself! Do not reject us forever."

Nowhere do we find a more extensive or elaborately argued plea for revival than in the eighty-ninth Psalm. It is to this Psalm that I want to devote our attention.

The theme of this Psalm is the sharp and painful contrast which the Psalmist saw between the covenanted mercies of God and His people's present moribund and desolate condition. He cries out, "You have renounced the covenant with Your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust.

You have broken through all his walls and reduced his strongholds to ruins” (v. 39). The Psalmist saw the presence of God withdrawn: “How long, O Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever?” (v. 46). He saw the anger and displeasure of God turned toward His people: “How long will Your wrath burn like fire?” (v. 46). Above all, he was incited to cry because he saw the honor of God being reproached in the world: “the taunts with which Your enemies have mocked, O Lord, with which they have mocked every step of Your anointed one” (v. 51).

The Psalm divides into four sections. Verses 1-18 are concerned with the praise of God for His covenanted mercies. Verses 19-37 are concerned with a rehearsal of the terms of God’s covenant. In verses 38-45 there is a dark and painful contrast with the present situation. Finally, verses 46-52 are an urgent plea to God to manifest Himself and vindicate His honor.

Pleading God’s Character

The Psalm opens with a cry of praise: “I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make Your faithfulness known through all generations.” When you consider the condition of God’s people, described from verse 38 onward, this is quite remarkable. The Psalmist is speaking out of a situation in which he sees the people and cause of God languishing. Yet he begins by magnifying the name and honor of God and expressing his wonder at God’s great faithfulness and steadfast love. This teaches that even when we are in days of great darkness, deeply burdened for the cause of God, all our thinking and all our crying to God must be from a posture of worship. That is one of the great characteristics of the Psalms written in such periods.

The classic example is Job. In the days of his great humiliation he rent his garments, shaved his head as a sign of his distress, and then—notice this carefully—fell upon

his face and worshiped God, crying, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21).

The Psalmist is convinced that God is always worthy of praise, not just at the time when He is pleasing us. Because He has not changed! It is we who have changed. He abides faithful. The Psalmist says His love is “steadfast” and “established forever.” Notice how frequently the words “from generation to generation” and “forever” appear in these verses. They mean that the writer is praising the unchangeable character of God. Nor is that only the posture from which he prays; it is also the very stimulus he has to call upon God in this bleak period. He recognizes that God is unchanging in His infinite majesty and in the glory of His character.

It is important to notice the kind of man who effectively pleads with God to revive His cause. He is a man whose soul is stirred and enlarged by the limitless glories of God. This is what he focuses on from verse 5 onward.

The heavens praise Your wonders, O Lord, Your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones. For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord? Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings? . . . O Lord God Almighty, who is like You? (vv. 5-6, 8). You rule over the surging sea (v. 9). You crushed Rahab like one of the slain (v. 10). The heavens are Yours, and Yours also the earth; You founded the world and all that is in it (v. 11).

This is a pattern of how God teaches His people to plead with Him. In the prayers of the Bible, when God’s people recognize themselves to be in great need they become preoccupied with the greatness of God in creation, history and nature. This enlarges their hearts to call upon Him.

Again, this is used by God as an argument to persuade His people to trust him. You find it in Isaiah:

Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?" Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. (Isalah 40:27-29)

Have you ever noticed how frequently God says, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," or "I am the God who brought your fathers up out of the Red Sea"? Why does God speak this way? The people knew that He had done it, but He is persuading them from His past dealings with them to trust Him and come to Him again. This rich view of God is the ground on which we plead with Him to revive His cause.

Prayer Provoked by Promises

In verses 19-37 the Psalmist moves on from pleading God's character to pleading God's covenanted promises. This passage has a close relation to 2 Samuel 7:8-16. It teaches us two general lessons about prayer for revival. First, prayer for the restoration of God's people is prayer which is led by Holy Scripture, for the Psalmist reviews what God has said (v. 19). This is both the stimulus and boundary of prayer. As we call upon God He illumines our understanding by Holy Scripture and thus teaches us to pray. Where do we discover the glories of God's character which we plead before Him? It is in Holy Scripture. For this reason, when God creates prayer warriors He begins by making them Bible students.

The second lesson about prayer for revival from these verses is that God delights to be reminded of His promises: "You said, 'I have made a covenant with My chosen one'" (v. 3); "once You spoke in a vision" (v. 19). Notice the many "I will's" from verse 23 onward: "I will crush his foes before

him. . . . I will set his hand over the sea. . . . I will also appoint him My first-born. I will maintain My love to him forever. . . . I will establish his line forever. . . . If his sons forsake My law and do not follow My statutes. . . . I will punish their sin with the rod. . . . but I will not take My love from him. . . . I will not violate My covenant. . . . I will not lie to David." Robert Murray McCheyne used to say, "Every 'I will' on God's lips should become a 'Wilt thou' on our lips, for promises should provoke prayers."

In these verses the Psalmist is speaking of the election and anointing of David: "I have found David My servant; with My sacred oil I have anointed him" (v. 20). But it is also a clear picture of the election and anointing of great David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When the Father covenants with Him He covenants with His elect in Him. Thus: "I will maintain My love to Him forever, and My covenant with Him will never fail. I will establish His line forever, His throne as long as the heavens endure" (vv. 28-29). The covenant means that God's anointed will triumph. Verses 30-34 tell us that although the elect will be chastened when they sin, they will not utterly fall away: "I will not violate My covenant or alter what My lips have uttered" (v. 34). God is saying that His word is eternally reliable, that He never goes back upon it. His word will last forever.

Jonathan Edwards said, "That which God abundantly makes the subject of His promises, God's people should abundantly make the subject of their prayers."

Jealousy for the Name of God

Verses 38-45 are the third great movement of the Psalm. Using the truth he has already cited, the Psalmist now expostulates with God concerning the present condition of His people. Their condition does not bring honor to God's name: "You have rejected, You have spurned, You have been very angry with Your anointed one. You have re-

nounced the covenant with Your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust" (v. 38). The Psalmist does not pretend that the situation is better than it appears to be.

It is vital that we learn this lesson from the Psalm. Since the Psalmist does not try to touch up the picture, neither should we. It is not only permissible but our bounden duty to compare what God is doing with what He has promised in His Word. When His providences do not seem to match His promises, our duty is not to remain inactive and unmoved but to emulate the Psalmist by fervent intercession that God would make Himself known.

Listen to the words of one writer on this Psalm:

If God is not manifestly blessing His church but rather giving her over to reproaches and to disgraceful weakness, then it is an expression of our love to Him to be fired with holy boldness and to expostulate with Him on the basis of His covenant pledges to us as His people. If He has infallibly declared that the gates of hell shall never prevail to destroy the church, must we not expostulate with Him when He permits us now great inroads of the powers of darkness upon us? If God has given Christ the heathen for His inheritance, can we remain dumb in our prayer life about the countless multitudes perishing around us? If the Lord has called preaching the wisdom of God and the power of God, can we dispassionately allow sermon after sermon to be preached with no appearance of that wisdom or power in our midst? If God has promised to avenge speedily His elect who cry to Him day and night, should we not be exercised with deep concern that mighty answers are not sent to us?

The Psalmist grieves because he cares for the honor of the Lord. He knows that the sovereign Lord is jealous for His own glory, and it appears that God is permitting His people to be reproached and shamed. This reflects on Him. That is the root of his intercession. The key to his burden is jealousy for the name of God.

It was this which provoked Paul in his spirit at Athens. He saw the city full of idols and he was "greatly distressed" (Acts 17:16). The various translations of this scarcely do justice to Paul's burden. The word which the NIV renders "greatly distressed" is suspected of being used in Greek medical terminology for a heart attack. What we are being told by Luke is that Paul had a paroxysm of spirit when he saw the glory of the only true God dragged down into the idol worship of Athens. It is interesting that in the Septuagint this same word is used of God being distressed with Israel for making the golden calf. What provoked God in relation to Israel and Paul in relation to Athens was burning jealousy for God's glory. This is always part of the prelude to revival. History shows that God's people begin to know something of this zeal.

Do you know the story of Henry Martyn, that great Cambridge scholar who in his brief life served God in the East translating the Bible into Persian? He told how at one point in his travels he had seen a drawing in which Jesus was represented as catching hold of the garments of Mohammed and bowing to him. Martyn was deeply distressed in spirit. He was in tears. When someone asked him what was upsetting him he replied, "I could not endure existence if Jesus were not to be glorified. It would be hell to me if He were always thus to be dishonored."

It is that spirit which I find so lacking in my own soul and in the contemporary evangelical church. I find that we are roused very much these days by pictures of the physical distress of people in the Third World, and rightly so. But it is a strange thing to me that I can walk through cities like Glasgow or Philadelphia and not find the spirit gripping me which gripped the apostle in Athens, namely zeal for God's honor. We need to ask ourselves why we do not share the Psalmist's distress over our situation. It is perhaps because we do not share his zeal for the honor of the name of God

which is brought into reproach? Or, if we are distressed over the present situation, we need to ask whether it is motivated by a care for the honor of God and zeal for His name, or for our reputation and our name?

How long? How long?

In the fourth section (vv. 46-52) the Psalmist pleads that God would turn the tide of events in his own lifetime: "How long, O Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever? How long will Your wrath burn like fire?" What the Psalmist grieves over and cries to God to turn is His displeasure. He knows that there are things in the life of the people that are causing God's displeasure. He knows that God has in some sense withdrawn Himself. So he cries out, "How long? . . . Will You hide Yourself forever?"

There are two grounds for the urgency of this concern: first, the length of time God's cause has languished ("How long, O Lord?"), and second, the brevity of his own life ("Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility You have created all men! What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave?").

He makes this urgent plea on the basis of God's covenant: "O Lord, where is Your former great love, which in Your faithfulness You swore to David?" (v. 49). He is reminding God that He has placed Himself under obligation to His people. Here is great boldness. But this is an important thing to learn from the Psalmist's prayer. There is a distinction to be drawn between God's works for His people being gracious and being voluntary. All God's works are gracious, but His blessing upon His church is not voluntary in the sense that God has laid Himself under obligation. Someone has said, "If God has sworn to do us good, then He is bound by the terms of His own infallible veracity and faithfulness to make good His covenanted promise." That is why, so to speak, we may give Him no rest.

In verses 50 and 51 the writer pleads God's honor again.

God's honor is bound up with the good of His church, so that the taunts of the Psalmist's enemies are actually the taunts of God's enemies. The object of their mockery is God's "anointed one." At this point the Psalm comes to an abrupt close. These matters are left with God in the confidence that He will act in due time.

Let me conclude by giving you an example of this principle very close to my own experience in Scotland. In the late 1940s and early 1950s in Scotland, the number of conservative evangelicals in the ministry was minimal, so minimal that you could probably have counted them on the fingers of two hands. One of the standard jokes in most faculties of divinity was to announce at dinner hour that after the meal the conservative evangelicals would meet in the telephone booth. The painful thing was that they probably could have done so; there were so few of them. Around that time a small band of godly ministers was profoundly distressed that the cause of God was in such reproach. So they met together to plead with God for His church in Scotland. They met very frequently—in the early morning, often late into the night. They did so for a period of five years. Then it seemed as if God had freed them from that special burden. They had seen nothing happen. There was no evidence that God had heard their cry, no sign of the tide changing.

Today, however, in Scotland the situation is very different. There are literally hundreds of younger men exercising a biblical, expository ministry with a Reformed base. It is difficult to go to any area of the country and not be within reach of such a ministry. God has transformed the situation. But what has come home to me with a special sense of wonder is that almost all these men were born within the period in which those earlier men of God were praying. They were literally born of prayer. People of my generation were born again precisely in these years.

I do not say that the spiritual situation in Scotland contains no cause for grief. I do not say that all congregations are full of people zealous for the glory of God. But God has raised up biblical ministries all over the land. Who is to say what God might do in our lands in years to come if He were to find among us men and women who would take such burdens upon their hearts and really pray for revival?

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