

Revival and Fasting

by John Piper

There was a Presbyterian minister in Albany, New York, who died in 1876. He had been the pastor of the Presbyterian church in Albany for 40 years. His name was William Sprague (1795-1876). His life spanned the time of the Second Great Awakening when hundreds of churches were awakened in the early years of the 19th century and thousands of men and women were converted.

Sprague wrote a book called Lectures on Revivals in 1832. Charles Simeon, the evangelical leader in England at the time, and pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, wrote in the fly leaf of his copy of Lectures on Revivals, "A most valuable book I love the good sense of Dr. Sprague." And when it was republished in 1958 by the Banner of Truth, Martin Lloyd-Jones of the Westminster Chapel in London was so full of thanks that he wrote the Foreword and said, "I am profoundly convinced that the greatest need in the world today is revival in the Church of God. Yet alas! the whole idea of revival seems to have become strange to so many good Christian people... [This] is due both to a serious misunderstanding of the scriptures, and to woeful ignorance of the history of the Church..."

My prayer is that as we read it and are reminded of "Our glorious God," and of His mighty deeds in times past among His people, a great sense of our own unworthiness and inadequacy, and a corresponding longing for the manifestation of His glory and His power will be created within us. His "arm is not shortened." May this book stir us all to plead with Him to make bare that arm and to stretch it forth again, that His enemies may be confounded and scattered and His people's hearts be filled with gladness and rejoicing."

If I understand correctly, that is what this day of prayer is all about. We believe that the Lord's arm is not shortened and that he has appointed this day for pleading with him to stretch it forth again to confound his enemies and awaken the joy and power of his church for the evangelization of the world.

I agree with Lloyd-Jones that revival in the church is the greatest need in the world today. But I doubt that very many people know what Lloyd-Jones means when he speaks of revival. The use of the term in our century for a brief evangelistic crusade has made the original meaning almost inaccessible to most Christians.

This is why an old book like Sprague's Lectures on Revivals is so tremendously helpful. One of the great things about the book is the 165 pages of correspondence it contains. For example, there is a letter from Francis Wayland which is of great interest to us Baptists when we want to know what our forebears from 150 years ago thought about revivals.

Francis Wayland was an outstanding Baptist pastor and president of Brown University in Rhode Island. He was a great admirer of Adoniram Judson, the Baptist Missionary to Burma, and he wrote the first major biography of Judson. He was born in 1772 and flourished through the first half of the 19th century (1772-1849).

In 1832 he wrote a letter to Sprague about revivals. Let's try to get a flavor of what he means by revival and the means God uses to bring it.

"I believe in the existence of revivals of religion, as much as I believe in any other fact, either physical or moral. By revivals of religion I mean special seasons in which the minds of men, within a certain district, or in a certain congregation, are more than usually susceptible of impression from the exhibition of moral truth...

[For example] ministers are more than usually desirous of the conversion of men. They possess, habitually, an unusual power of presenting the simple truths of the gospel directly to the consciences of their hearers, and feel a peculiar consciousness of their own weakness and insufficiency, and at the same time a perfect reliance upon the efficacy of the gospel, through the agency of the Spirit, to convert men.

Christians, during periods of revival, are characterized by an unusual spirit of penitence, of confession of sin, and of prayer, by a desire for more holiness, and specially by a tender concern for the salvation of souls.

Unconverted persons are more desirous to hear the gospel, and particularly the plainest and simplest exhibitions of it; they readily listen to conversation on the subject and seem to expect it. Truths which they have frequently heard with total unconcern they now hear with solemn and fixed attention; and in many cases, for days together, scarcely a sermon will be preached, or an exhortation offered, which is not made effectual to the conviction or conversion of one or more souls."

And where do such revivals of religion come from? Those who preached the old gospel of Wayland and Sprague believed that they were the sovereign work of God. Sprague puts it like this (p. 105):

"In every revival we are distinctly to recognize the sovereignty of God. As this is displayed in the influence by which a single soul is converted, it certainly is not less manifest in those copious showers of influence by which hundreds are converted. He who causes it to rain on one city and not on another, directs the motion of those clouds in the spiritual world from which descend the blessings of reviving and quickening grace. "The wind bloweth, where it listeth; and thou hearest the sound thereof; but canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit." And so too is every revival of religion."

So revival is a sovereign, supernatural work of God. And this has significant bearing on how we should seek it. Francis Wayland mentions three things we should do as prelude to the outpouring of God's Spirit in revival.

1. One is the putting away of all known sin.
2. Another is the setting apart of seasons of fasting and prayer and humiliation both individually and collectively.
3. And the third is the more frequent and more faithful preaching of the gospel.

I wish we had time to deal with each of these in detail. My task is to treat the second, especially fasting. But just briefly let me mention Wayland's summary of the kind of preaching that has been used of God to promote sustained revival. This is the sort of thing we should pray for in our pulpits.

"The doctrines which have been most successfully exhibited in the promotion of revivals of religion ... [include especially] the entire [lack] of holiness in all men by nature; the justice of God in the everlasting condemnation of sinners; the exceeding sinfulness of sin; the total inability of man, by his own works, to reconcile himself to God; the sufficiency, freedom and fullness of the atonement; the duty of immediate repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ; the inexcusableness of delay; the exhibition of the refuges of lies under which sinners hide themselves; the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners; the clear exhibition of the truth that he is under no manner of obligation to save them; and the necessity of the agency of the Spirit of God to the conversion of any individual of the human race."

In other words, in Francis Wayland's view, the truths that God has seemed to honor with the reviving work of his Holy Spirit have been those truths that accent the

1. Justice and holiness of God as the judge of all sinners,
2. The desperate and hopeless condition of all men,
3. The glory of Christ's work,
4. The free and sovereign grace of God, and
5. The utter necessity of repentance and faith.

The accent here is miles and miles apart from contemporary TV Christianity.

In fact, one of the characteristics of the old revivals that we need very much to consider and follow is their utter seriousness and solemnity. There is a place for humor in our lives, but there is something deeply wrong that we feel compelled to use so much of it in teaching and preaching and even worshiping. Listen to William Sprague's assessment of this situation written 150 years ago, when things were never so permeated with levity as they are today. This comes from Lectures on Revivals, pp. 118-120.

"All the means which God's word authorizes, are characterized by seriousness.

I may appeal to any of you who have been in the midst of a revival, whether a deep solemnity did not pervade the scene; whether, even if it is your common business to trifle, you were not compelled to be solemn then? And if you have wished at such a moment to be gay, have you not felt that that was not the place for it....

Now then, if there be a high degree of solemnity belonging essentially to a revival of religion... surely every measure that is adopted in connection with it, ought to partake of the same character. It were worse than preposterous to think of carrying forward such a work by any means which are not marked by the deepest seriousness, or to introduce any thing which is adapted to awaken and cherish the lighter emotions, when all such emotions should be awed out of the mind. All ludicrous anecdotes, and modes of expression, and gestures, and attitudes, are never more out of place than

when the Holy Spirit is moving upon the hearts of a congregation. Everything of this kind is fitted to grieve him away; because it directly contradicts the errand on which he has come;—that of convincing sinners of their guilt, and renewing them to repentance. Nor is the case at all relieved by the occasional introduction of what may be really solemn and weighty; for its legitimate effect is almost of course neutralized by the connection in which it is presented; and that which might otherwise fall with awful power upon the conscience, is thus rendered utterly powerless and unimpressive. And not only so, but there is often in this way an association formed in the mind, which is exceedingly hostile to subsequent religious impressions;—an association between solemn truths which ought to make the sinner tremble, and ludicrous expressions which will supply him with matter for jests."

So it has seemed to me that if we are going to really seek and expect revival in our lives and churches and conference, we must get far more serious in our pursuit and our proceedings than we are.

This has led me in recent years, especially the six years that I have been pastor at Bethlehem, to consider the Biblical practice of fasting. For if there is anything that signifies seriousness, it is when you want something so badly that you will stop eating in the pursuit of it, or when the absence of something in your life or in the church or in the world grieves you so badly that you give up eating to express your humiliation and your longing to see it come.

The people that God has used to spark revival have often been men of extraordinary seriousness of purpose and much fasting. Jonathan Edwards, who led the Great Awakening 100 years before William Sprague and Francis Wayland reprimanded the ministers of his day like this:

"One thing more I would mention concerning fasting and prayer, wherein I think there has been a neglect in ministers; and that is, that although they recommend and much insist on the duty of secret prayer, in their preaching; so little is said about secret fasting. It is a duty recommended by our Saviour to his followers, just in the like manner as secret prayer is; as may be seen by comparing the 5th and 6th vss. of the 6th chapter of Matthew with vss. 16-18. Though I don't suppose that secret fasting is to be practiced in a stated manner and steady course as secret prayer, yet it seems to me 'tis a duty that all professing Christians should practice, and frequently practice."

Well my guess is that either Jonathan Edwards is wrong or 95% of us are wrong, for I doubt that 5% practice fasting at all, let alone frequently. But if Edwards is right, we are neglecting Christian duty similar to the way we would if we neglected prayer. And Edwards was no mean student of Scripture.

He directs our attention to Matthew 6. He points out that fasting is treated in the same way prayer is. Notice that there are three topics, each introduced similarly.

1. In verse 2, almsgiving: "When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues...."
2. In verse 5, prayer: "When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners...."
3. In verse 16, fasting: "When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites...."

Edwards' point is that fasting is treated as something the followers of Jesus will do just like prayer

and almsgiving. If we take this text to teach that secret prayer and almsgiving are duties, then fasting is, too. None of them is commanded here. Jesus just assumes that they will be part of our discipleship and obedience. And so he warns us against pursuing these duties for the praise of men.

Let's read the directions about fasting again:

"And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

The point here is that fasting is a feast. It is not a giving up of food for its own sake. It is a giving up of food either for the praise of men or for the reward of the heavenly Father. We are always driven to fast because we hunger for something more than food. That is the meaning of fasting: it cries out, "This I want more than the pleasure of food!" And "this" can be the admiration that men give to people with will power, or it can be the reward we seek from God alone without regard to the praise of men.

Jesus, of course, says, "Feast on God not man! Desire God in secret, not the praise of men in public." This is just another way of saying what William Sprague said about seriousness. No one engages in secret fasting in the presence of God alone with a spirit of levity or trifling. Even when you wash your face so as not to look dismal, there will be strong, earnest, serious longings in the soul. Secret fasting makes you real with God. It is just for God and it tests the authenticity of your hunger for his Spirit.

Well, it is time for lunch, and I need to find a way to invite you to stay for part two and for prayer without making those of you who have to go feel like second-class Christians. Here's how I can do it. We will just assume that you had an unbreakable appointment or that you are going away to fast in secret.

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