

Let us Pray for Revival! by Rev. Tom Aicken

Isaiah cried out to the Lord, “Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down!” (Isaiah 64:1). This was one part of his prayer for a revival of the Church, that God would capture the attention of men, drawing them to Himself in an open display of His presence and power. Clearly, the prophet was heartbroken when he uttered these words, but he also felt confused and frustrated. He knew, on the one hand, that so many in Israel, the Old Testament Church, had turned away from the Lord in order to go their own way (vv. 5-7) – and, of course, they were entirely wrong in doing that – but, on the other hand, the prophet knew as well that the Lord had a hand in this (63:17), that He might have stopped it from happening, and that even now the Lord could turn these wayward souls back to Himself if only He would choose to do so. Indeed, he knew that the Lord who had called them in the first place was the only One who *could* draw them back, so why does He not do so?

We may understand something of why the Lord allows the wicked of this world to go their own way, and even why in time He hands them over to their own vile passions (Romans 1:18f); it is that they might fall into the pit that they have dug for themselves and ultimately have to acknowledge that this was all their own doing. But why is it that the Lord appears at times to abandon even His own people? There are reasons for that, too, we may be sure, and these reasons have nothing at all to do with His failing to love them or to work all things together for their good as He has taught us (Romans 8:28). Gleaning from Holy Scripture, let me briefly offer three of those reasons which are revealed to us there.

(1) The Lord our God may withdraw for a certain period, or at least it may seem that He has done so, in order to purge the Church. We find an example of this in the exodus; it took Israel 40 years to cross over from Egypt into Canaan when they might have made that same journey in just a few months. We are told the purpose for that was to destroy a generation of the unfaithful in their number, and thus keep them from entering the promised land (Numbers 32:10-13). This does not mean that the Lord did not care for His own in the meantime, or that He did not faithfully provide for their daily needs – indeed, He did – even though they had to suffer the same hardships of that long, arduous trip.

(2) The Lord may appear to withdraw from His people for a time in order to chasten them, that is, to correct them, to put the wayward among them back on track. This should not surprise us, however, for (as with any loving parent) whom the Lord loves He chastens, and, though it may seem painful at the time, He chastens His own to make them partakers of His holiness, to produce in them the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:3-11).

(3) The Lord may hold back from His people for a time, and even appear to work against them in the afflictions He places upon them, though not for anything they have done wrong, and He does this in order to further their sanctification. Paul wrote of these trials as light and momentary afflictions which do not compare to the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory which follows. Nevertheless, as with Jesus who learned obedience through suffering (Hebrews 5:8), we need to learn it, too, and these trials are the means of doing so, of our coming to see through the eyes of faith what our natural eyes could never discern (2 Corinthians 4:17,18); this is one way that Christians grow in faith, into the very image and likeness of Christ. In that same way, the apostle himself received an undisclosed “thorn in the flesh” which was meant to keep him humble (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Does this mean that Isaiah was wrong to cry out for God to rend the heavens and come down? No, not in the least. On the contrary, may the whole Christian community lay before the Lord fervently and persistently this same request! It is a plea for revival, a blessing which the Church in our day needs as much as ever before. Whenever we look around and see the evidence of widespread apostasy, of Christians who have grown cold and careless, and of ministers who preach only a watered-down gospel, let us pray with burdened hearts, “Rend the heavens, O God, and come down!”

Does it not seem to you, dear believer, as it did to the prophet Isaiah, that the Lord is not doing in our day what He has done so many times in the past, that He has shut Himself up in the heavens as if to leave His people to their own resources? Then let us pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit! Let us also search our hearts to see if His present holding back is a result of our own need for chastening, or for greater obedience and sanctification through suffering. Revival always begins with a confession of sins, many of which have been harboured and secretly embraced for a long time, and along with that confession a clear,

unmistakable demonstration of repentance for those sins. We are to pursue holiness, but that must begin each and every time with turning from sin.

If we recognize the need for revival in our day, and earnestly desire it as Isaiah did in his, a time of spiritual refreshing which can come only from the presence of the Lord, let us consider three great reasons for revival as incentives to cry out for it.

(1) Starting in the most obvious place, if we find our own spiritual life to be parched and dry, making little or no progress in our walk with the Lord, we who know the Lord and know that we have done better in the past need to drink again from those refreshing waters which first gave us life in Christ. We must hide God's Word in our hearts, meditate upon it, and learn to pray without ceasing. Making diligent use of all the means of grace, public and private, will give us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. We must come to Christ, yes, and commit everything to Him, but it is not enough to do that once; we must continue to do so, continue to be filled with His Spirit and experience the ongoing blessing of waiting upon Him. We may know that we should do these things, of course, and even feel guilty if we do not, but revival constrains us to do them, and, being so stirred by the Holy Spirit within the local church, the body of Christ of which we are members, we become a help and encouragement to one another as well.

In my congregation in northern New Brunswick where I first served as a pastor, I remember reading of a revival which had broken out in a neighbouring community back in 1865. The people had suddenly become so zealous for the things of the Lord that they were no longer content with two sabbath day services and a mid-week prayer meeting; they wanted more, to meet as often as they could and to take in as much as their thirsty souls would consume. Their pastor, a Presbyterian minister from Scotland, was so overwhelmed with the demands placed upon him that he wrote letters back home to recruit any help he might find. This was revival, and the effects of it were still witnessed a generation later.

(2) It is not enough, however, to be so refreshed ourselves. It would be a terrible state for the Church to be in to feel no compassion for the perishing world around her. A genuine love for the Lord and other people will stoke fires within us of a longing to get the attention of even unbelievers, that they, too, might be compelled to acknowledge the Lord and to tremble before Him (Isaiah 64:2). We need to remember, of course, that the message of the cross is itself the power of

God unto salvation, the very means He uses to draw sinners and to bind them to Christ (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:4,5). Let us not be slack, then, in reaching out to friends and family, to co-workers and neighbours, with this same gospel message that first drew us to Christ and to that living faith which made Him precious to us.

At the same time, though, we should also be aware that demonstrable evidence of God's presence and overwhelming power – even apart from their hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, even just seeing the transformation which is made obvious to everybody of the Lord working in and through His people in times of revival – often compels unbelievers to think about God, and to talk about Him in ways that they would never have imagined prior to that. It is not enough, of course – they still need to be regenerated by hearing the gospel – but seeing the hand of God at work in His people is a very moving influence in itself, and those who witness it often want to hear the gospel preached, to learn how and why God is working as He is, and it should not surprise us, therefore, that many unbelievers are converted to Christ in times of Spirit-led revival.

(3) The ultimate purpose of revival is the glory of God. A revival of the Church is of great benefit to believers, and can even be to unbelievers as we have seen, but the main reason for it (and it should be our chief incentive to cry out for it) is to glorify God and to seek our enjoyment in Him. As added inducements, God has told us that He delights to hear the prayers of His people (Psalm 145:18), and that He can do so much more than we could ever ask or even imagine (Ephesians 3:20,21). Let us pray then for a revival of God's people and for an awakening to sweep across the entire country. A day is coming when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord – this will be the ultimate vindication of what God has achieved in the Person and work of Christ – and it is to be acknowledged, willingly or unwillingly, by all without exception (Philippians 2:10,11). Do we need a compelling reason to pray for revival? Here it is, that all the peoples of the earth may learn even now that the hand of the Lord is mighty (Joshua 4:24), that God's gracious purpose in Christ for the salvation of His people will be fulfilled to the uttermost (Hebrews 7:25), that not one of all whom the Father gives His Son will ever fail to come to Him, or ever be cast out once he has come to Him (John 6:37). And so, to God be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever!

