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PRAYING FOR REVIVAL

Psalm 80

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Praying for Revival Psalm 80

Del Fehsenfeld Jr., founder of Life Action Ministries, used to ask this convicting question: "If revival in this land depended on your prayers, your faith, your obedience, would we ever experience revival?" (*Spirit of Revival* [Feb., 1999], p. 11) I confess that while I do pray for revival, it is not with the faithfulness or fervor that I should pray. If you also fall short in this area, then Psalm 80 has a message for you:

We should pray earnestly for revival among God's people.

No one knows for sure when this psalm was written, but many scholars think that it was around 722 B.C. when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. (Thus the author would be a descendant of the Asaph of David's time, a member of the worship guild that he had founded.) The nation had divided over 200 years before under Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom, had set up an idolatrous form of worship in a deliberate attempt to keep his people from going to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:26-33). None of his successors had heeded the warnings of the godly prophets to remove this idolatrous worship. Finally, the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians, who deported many of the survivors and imported foreigners to mingle with those left in the land (2 Kings 17).

Psalm 80 may have been penned by a poet in the south who had witnessed the destruction of the north and was concerned that the same enemies not conquer the south. He no doubt saw the same unfaithfulness in the south that had led to the demise of the north. And so he earnestly entreats God to send revival. His prayer, repeated three times (80:3, 7, 19), "O God, restore us and cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved," is probably a prayer both for those in the north and those in the south. Those in the north needed to be restored to God and to the land. Those in the south needed to be restored to God before they experienced the same defeat and deportation that had happened in the north.

The psalm falls into four sections: (1) In 80:1-3, the psalmist prays for God, the Shepherd of Israel, to restore and save His flock. (2) In 80:4-7, he asks God how long He will be angry and allow Israel's enemies to taunt them. (3) In 80:8-13, the psalmist gives a short history that pictures Israel as a vine that God transplanted from Egypt to Canaan. At first it flourished and grew (8-11), but now it is neglected and overrun by those that plunder it. (4) This leads to the final impassioned prayer (80:14-19) for God to take care of His devastated people by restoring and saving them.

Rather than follow the order of the psalm, I want to look at it from the practical perspective of how we can develop greater faithfulness and fervency to pray for revival. By "revival," I'm not referring to the popular image of setting up a tent or putting a sign out in front of the church, "Revival Here This Week! 7 p.m." A sweaty evangelist preaches hellfire and damnation sermons, urging people to walk the aisle and decide for Jesus. Such "revivals" are manipulative human attempts to produce what only God can produce.

Rather, genuine revivals begin when through the preaching of the Word, the Holy Spirit convicts people of their spiritual apathy and sin. At the same time, He opens their eyes to get a new glimpse of the holiness of God and of His wrath against sin. As they come under conviction, they realize that their sin has separated them from God. This is the cause of the difficulties that they have been experiencing. The troubles may be on a personal or on a national level. But people begin to see their desperate condition. They realize that they are helpless to do anything about it, unless God powerfully remedies the situation. They also realize that their faithless, disobedient lives have dishonored His holy name. And so they repent and ask God to be glorified in their midst.

Such revivals are a sovereign work of God that affect many at the same time. Often in history they have spread around the globe. Christians repent of sins that they have been practicing. Churchgoers who were not truly saved get saved. Many outsiders are drawn to the Lord for salvation as they witness the changed lives of God's people. Such revivals have literally changed the course of history. Many believe that 18th century England was spared from revolution because of the revival under the Wesley's and George Whitefield. In light of the past 40 years of increasing degeneracy in our nation,

we desperately need genuine, Spirit-sent revival. Psalm 80 reveals three things that will help us pray more earnestly for it:

1. We will pray more earnestly for revival when we sense our desperate need.

God sometimes puts His people in difficult places so that they will see their desperate need and cry out to Him. Psalm 80 oozes with the urgency of the psalmist's appeal, stemming from his realization of the desperate situation. God's people have been fed the bread of tears (80:5). They have drunk "tears by the bowlful" (80:5, NIV). Their neighbors contend against them and laugh them to scorn (80:6). They are being plundered by all that pass by (80:12). They are like a vine burned with fire and cut down (80:16). So they desperately need God to restore and save them. We can apply this by noting two reasons that we desperately need revival:

- A. We need revival because of the powerful enemies that seek to destroy us.

In Israel's case, their need for restoration and salvation were both physical and spiritual. They needed physical safety from enemy nations that threatened to annihilate them. But they also needed to turn from idolatry and religious syncretism back to the worship of the one true God.

In terms of physical enemies, the north had either just fallen or was on the verge of falling to the brutal Assyrian army. They later surrounded Jerusalem and were on the verge of conquering the south before God destroyed their entire army in response to Hezekiah's prayer.

Scholars do not agree on the reasons why the psalmist asks God to stir up His power "before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh" (80:2). Joseph and Benjamin were the only sons of Rachel; Ephraim and Manasseh were Joseph's sons. They were the dominant tribes of the ten tribes of the north, but Benjamin was united with Judah and was spared in the Assyrian deportation. Perhaps Benjamin is mentioned here because Ephraim and Manasseh in the north had already fallen and Benjamin was geographic buffer between the north and the south. Whatever the explanation, God's people always were threatened by powerful enemies that sought to wipe them out.

In a similar manner, the church has always been threatened by the powers of darkness that seek to annihilate her. Sometimes the enemy has exterminated the church in entire regions, such as Turkey and North Africa. First Peter 5:8 warns us, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." If we kept in mind our vulnerability to this powerful enemy, we would pray more earnestly for God to stir up His power to revive us.

B. We need revival because of the powerful sins that often entangle us.

The psalmist mentions (80:4) that God was even angry with the prayers of His people! The Hebrew literally says that He was smoked with them! There is only one reason that God would be angry with His people's prayers, namely, that they were tolerating sin in their lives at the same time that they were asking Him to deliver them from these enemies. God promised that if they humbled themselves, turned from their wicked ways and prayed, He would heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14). He hadn't gone back on His promise. The problem was, the people had not humbled themselves and turned from their wicked ways. God's vineyard had only produced worthless grapes (Isa. 5:1-7). They needed revival to bring them to genuine repentance for their many sins.

One mark of genuine revival is that God's people awaken to a new and deeper sense of their sinfulness before Him. Through the Word, the Holy Spirit convicts them of sins that they have been brushing off as no big deal. Maybe they've excused their sins by saying, "We're under grace!" Or they've minimized their sins by comparing themselves with those who are worse sinners. In his excellent book, *Revival* ([Crossway Books], p. 41 [see, also, pp. 101, 156-157, 231]), Martyn Lloyd-Jones says,

When you have a revival you see men and women groaning, agonising under the conviction of sin. They are so conscious of their unworthiness, and their vileness, that they feel that they cannot live. They do not know what to do with themselves. They cannot sleep. They are in an agony of soul.

We also need to note that although we now may enjoy God's blessing, that does not guarantee the future. Israel had once experi-

enced God's blessing. The psalmist rehearses (80:8) how God had brought them out of Egypt, drove out the nations, and planted them in the Promised Land. For a while, under David and Solomon, they flourished and spread out even as far as the Euphrates River (80:11). But from that glorious past, they had now fallen into the grim description we read here (80:12, 13, 16). They needed revival because they had become entangled in the sins of the pagan nations around them.

That describes the church in America! Once the church had a powerful influence in this country. Although many of the founding fathers were not born-again Christians, they were greatly influenced by the Bible. They incorporated biblical truth into the founding documents. George Washington said, "Religion [he meant Christianity] and Morality are the essential pillars of civil society" (cited by Iain Murray, *Revival & Revivalism* [Banner of Truth], p. 114).

But in the past forty or fifty years, the church's influence in America has been decimated. We are laughed at as hypocrites (which is often the truth!) or castigated as intolerant and ignorant. Much of this has come upon us because we are not much different than the pagans around us. We need revival because we've become entangled in sin. Without revival, we will perish at the rebuke of God's holy countenance (80:16). The church's desperate need should motivate us to pray more earnestly for genuine revival.

2. We will pray more earnestly for revival when we realize that only God can produce genuine revival.
 - A. Humanly orchestrated "revivals" are not genuine or lasting in their effects.

It's possible to get people to walk the aisle and make decisions for Christ through various techniques: emotional music; stories that touch people's feelings; and powerful closing appeals linked with counselors streaming towards the front. Charles Finney popularized these sorts of gimmicks in the 1830's. He believed that if you used proper methods, revival would follow (see Murray, *ibid.*, p. 247). But Finney believed that conversion was merely a matter of people deciding to change, not of God changing their hearts. His seriously defective views on conversion and revival, along with his manipulative methods, are still with us today.

B. When God restores us and shines His face upon us, we will be truly saved.

H. C. Leupold (*Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 581) comments on the psalmist's repeated refrain for God to shine His face on us, "So potent is God's good pleasure that, as soon as it becomes operative, deliverance sets in." There will be at least four results:

(1) Sinners will be saved.

In the Old Testament, *salvation* often refers to physical deliverance from enemies. But there is also a spiritual element, in that the reason the nation was in danger from its enemies was that they had turned from the Lord. They knew the Jewish rituals and customs and practiced them religiously, but their hearts were far from God. So the psalmist's cry for God to save them was at least in part a cry for Him to save the people from sin and judgment.

Even so today when God sends genuine revival, people who have attended church for years get saved. Maybe they grew up in the church. Perhaps they are church members who can recite John 3:16 and who say that they believe in Christ. But they have never been born again. God has never changed their hearts. But when the Spirit sends genuine revival, they see their need of Christ, repent of their sins, and are genuinely saved.

(2) God will raise the church from the ashes.

John Calvin certainly saw God revive the church from the deadness of medieval Catholicism in amazing ways. He points out (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 80:16, p. 306) that even though the church is seemingly hopeless, smoldering in ashes because of God's judgment on her sin, when we repent, He can enrich and bless us with His unparalleled mercy. Even though the church in America seems hopeless, God is able to work if we entreat Him to shine His countenance on us again.

(3) We will not turn back from the Lord (80:18a).

In other words, when God works by shining His countenance on us, it is effectual and lasting. It is not based on emotional decisions, but on a real change of heart.

(4) We will call upon His name (80:18b).

“Revive us” means, “give us life” (ESV). When God gives us new life, then we call upon Him, not just to get us out of a difficult trial, but as a way of life to express our dependence on Him.

So we will pray more earnestly for revival when we see our great need and when we realize that we cannot produce revival. Only God can send it as we cry out to Him for mercy.

3. We will pray more earnestly for revival when we desire for God to be glorified.

The psalm begins (80:1), “Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth!” The cherubim hovered over the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. God’s glory shone forth from there. But now, because of the nation’s sin, God’s glory has not been seen. Instead, the pagan nations laugh Israel and her God to scorn (80:6). So the psalmist cries out to God to shine forth with His glory. As the Good Shepherd of His people, the Lord has brought them into a desperate situation so that they will obey the words of Psalm 50:15, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.” There are at least five ways that God is glorified when we pray earnestly for revival:

- A. God is glorified in revival when He shows His mighty power to save.

We’ve seen this, but three times (80:3, 7, 19) the psalmist cries out for God to restore them and cause His face to shine upon them so that they will be saved. As I said, this no doubt referred to deliverance from their enemies. But it also has the spiritual dimension, because sin and idolatry were at the root of Israel’s problems. They needed for God to save them spiritually.

We need to understand that salvation is not a human thing, where a person of his own free will decides to ask Jesus into his heart. Salvation is when God imparts new life to dead sinners. He changes their hearts so that they believe and obey. Many that have “asked Jesus into their hearts” are not saved. “Salvation is from the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). Because it requires God’s resurrection power (not just a human decision), it glorifies Him.

- B. God is glorified in revival when His people obey Him.

God is called the Shepherd of Israel (80:1). Shepherds lead their sheep and the sheep follow, trusting the shepherd to lead them into a place of safety and abundance. Stray sheep get eaten by predators. Once Marla and I were descending from Wetterhorn Peak in Colorado. We were in the trees when we heard an unusual commotion. Suddenly we encountered over 2,000 sheep being led to their summer pasture above tree line. But as we got down almost to the trailhead, we encountered one stray sheep. He ran from us into the wilderness and I said, "That one's a goner!"

Jesus said (John 10:27-28), "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." God is glorified when Jesus' sheep follow Him.

C. God is glorified in revival when His people are fruitful.

The analogy of Israel as God's vine implies that they were to bear fruit for Him. In Isaiah 5:1-7, God complains that Israel as His vine has only produced worthless grapes. So He says that He is going to remove its hedge and let it be consumed and trampled on. Jesus used the vine analogy, saying that He is the true vine and we are the branches. We are to bear fruit for Him. If we do not bear fruit, we will be cut off and thrown into the fire. But, Jesus adds (John 15:8), "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples." When true revival comes, God's people bear fruit for Him.

D. God is glorified in revival when there is genuine unity among His people.

This psalm most likely represents the prayer of a man in the Southern Kingdom for his alienated brothers in the north. He sets aside tribal rivalries and prays earnestly for God to take care of those who are perishing because of the enemy. When revival comes, God's people set aside petty differences and love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We do not set aside the essentials of the gospel, such as justification by faith alone in Christ alone. But we set aside our pride over being right on minor points of doctrine and practice. Genuine unity glorifies God.

E. God is glorified in revival when His people come to know Him more deeply.

Did you notice that in the refrain, God is addressed in a progressively deeper way? First (80:3), it is, "O God." Then (80:7), it is, "O God of hosts." Finally (80:19), it is, "O Lord God of hosts." Revival opens our eyes to see more deeply who God really is. He is the only true God. Further, He is the God who commands the angelic hosts. Further yet, He is the Lord God, before whom every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Phil. 2:10). When God revives us, we glorify Him by coming to know Him more deeply.

Conclusion

So let's pray for genuine, Holy Spirit-sent revival! I must point out that there is a sense in which this prayer was not answered, at least not in the history of Israel. The Northern Kingdom never was restored. The Southern Kingdom saw periods of revival under Hezekiah and Josiah, but it finally went into captivity in Babylon.

But there is a note of hope here. The psalmist asks God (80:15) to take care of the shoot (lit., son) which His right hand has planted, even the son whom He has strengthened. He again (80:17) asks that God's hand be on the man of His right hand, upon the son of man whom He has made strong for Himself.

Who is this? In the context, it is probably the nation, or the king of the nation (Hezekiah). But many Jewish commentators saw it as a reference to Messiah. In light of Jesus' frequent reference to Himself as the Son of Man, it is reasonable to see it as a prayer for God to send and strengthen Jesus the Messiah. He is the one who brings true and lasting revival to His people. Like the psalmist, we may or may not see revival in our day. But we should still pray earnestly. The ultimate fulfillment of our prayers for revival will be when Jesus comes in power and glory to reign.

Here is a practical opportunity: On July 5th, 6th, and 7th we're going to have three evenings of prayer (7-8 p.m.). Put it on your calendar and make it a priority to come and cry out to our Good Shepherd (80:18b-19), "Revive us, and we will call upon Your name. O Lord God of hosts, restore us and cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved."

Application Questions

1. In a revival, how can we tell the genuine from the false? (Hint: read Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise on Religious Affections*.)
2. Why can't genuine revival be organized or planned? If it is a sovereign work of God, is there anything we can do to bring it about?
3. Why is there a difference between going forward (or making a decision for Christ) and being born again? What is the difference?
4. Why are obedience and fruitfulness better tests of genuine revival than emotionalism or "being slain in the Spirit"?

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