

Revivals And Church History :: When The Fire Fell From Heaven by George T. B. Davis

When The Fire Fell From Heaven by George T. B. Davis - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2006/7/17 2:11

When The Fire Fell From Heaven

On rare and memorable occasions, in Old Testament times, the fire fell from heaven.

One of these significant events occurred in the life of David. King David had sinned in numbering the people, and judgment was being poured out upon Israel. David earnestly confessed his sin and prayed. God heard his prayer. Judgment was stayed. Then, in obedience to God's command, David built an altar and offered sacrifices. And God "answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt offering" (I Chronicles 21:26).

Again the fire fell from heaven when Solomon dedicated the Temple. The falling fire signified the divine acceptance of the confession and prayer of his servant Solomon:

"Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the house."

At this marvellous manifestation of God's power the assembled multitude of the children of Israel bowed themselves in worship: "And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the LORD upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshipped, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever" (II Chronicles 7:3).

Later, Israel departed from the Lord in following Baal and worshipping idols. The prophet Elijah called the prophets of Baal and the children of Israel to Mount Carmel in a contest to let it be known which was the true God. Elijah said: "The God that answereth by fire, let him be God." The prophets of Baal built an altar and laid a bullock for sacrifice upon it. All day long they called upon their god, but there was no response.

At the time of the evening sacrifice Elijah repaired the altar of the LORD, and laid the bullock for the sacrifice upon it. At the command of the prophet they filled twelve barrels with water and poured them upon the sacrifice, until the water filled the trench about the altar. Elijah then quietly called upon God to manifest His power in order to bring the people back to Him: "Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God." (I Kings 18:38, 39.)

In New Testament times the sound of a rushing mighty wind," and "cloven tongues like as of fire" marked the descent of the Holy Ghost on the "birthday" of the Christian Church. This occurred after 120 faithful disciples had spent ten days, between Christ's ascension and the day of Pentecost, "with one accord in prayer and supplication."

Then the "cloven tongues" appeared, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost. They became flaming witnesses for Christ. Former cowards were transformed into men of boldness and courage. In one day 3000 souls were born again; and on another day, a little later, 5000 souls were saved.

Throughout the centuries since that memorable day of Pentecost God has sent the "fire from heaven" again and again to revive his children, and to lead multitudes of precious souls into the light of the gospel. These heaven-sent visitations of the Spirit have been like enkindling flames--warming, reviving, convicting, converting, empowering, men and women.

This little book is a record of some of these thrilling, never-to-be-forgotten times of revival. May the recounting of these times of blessing encourage us to believe that once again God is waiting to visit his Church with a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit in mighty quickening power! May He make us willing to fulfil the conditions of prayer, confession, and dedication, in order that the fire may fall again upon ourselves and upon our land!

Again and again throughout the centuries of the Christian era, the fire of God has fallen from heaven with untold blessing. In Scotland, in the year 1630, a young minister named John Livingston was invited to preach to a great assembly of people.

people in the open air. Realizing the importance of the meeting, groups of earnest Christians formed themselves into little companies and spent the night in earnest supplication for God's blessing upon the gathering. The young minister himself, John Livingston, was a member of one of the companies of all-night intercessors.

The next day as the hour of the meeting drew near, the young man felt himself utterly unworthy to preach to such a great gathering of people. He felt himself so insufficient for the task that he was preparing to steal away into the fields. However, his friends gathered about him and constrained him to remain. As the young man spoke, the Spirit of God came upon him in great power. His text was Ezekiel 36:25, 26: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

For two hours and a half the young man spoke with burning lips to the great audience. The heavenly "fire" fell upon the multitude and the scene was like another Pentecost. Rev. John Shearer in his book "Old Time Revivals" tells the story of what happened:

"The Spirit filled the speaker with a fullness that must be outpoured. The people seemed rooted to the ground in a great stillness. Five hundred men and women, some from the high ranks of society, some poor wretches and beggars; were converted where they stood, and lived from that day as those who had indeed received a new heart and a new spirit. The memory of that day has never died, and the very telling of the story has proved a fount of revival."

In the early days of the American colonies, the fire of God again fell from heaven in a great spiritual awakening, under the leadership of Jonathan Edwards. During the early part of Jonathan Edwards' ministry in New England we are told that "there was a marked decline in the religious life of the community. Among the young people the bands of morality had sadly relaxed. Frolics continued far into the night, and became the handmaid of vice.

With such conditions about him Jonathan Edwards gave himself to prayer and the ministry of the Word for eight years. Then suddenly the fire fell. Mr. Shearer gives a graphic picture of the scenes that were witnessed as the Spirit of God came down upon the people of the whole community. Suddenly, "conversions began to take place throughout the town. One of the first was that of a frivolous young woman, a leader in the 'frolics.' She became in very truth 'a new creature' so humble, pure, and gracious, so utterly transformed, that she was an object of wonder and amazement. The news of this conversion 'acted like a flash of lightning upon the hearts of the young people'; and as it flew from lip to lip the convicting Spirit seemed to pierce every heart that heard it. Indeed, throughout this revival, probably the most potent awakening agency was the simple news of another's conversion. A hunger for the same blessing was at once aroused in the hearer's heart.

"In the early months of 1735 the people pressed into the church daily, and for a time Northampton was literally filled with the presence of God. In almost every house parents were rejoicing over their children, and in the sanctuary the tears of penitence, of newfound joy, and deep compassion flowed freely. The whole congregation became like a heavenly choir, and praise was a sweet and holy sacrifice.

"The Bible was a new book. Texts that had been read a thousand times appeared with such fresh and novel interest that even old saints were tempted to think they had never seen them before, and regarded them with a strange wonder. Young converts read their Bibles with such eager intensity that their eyes became dimmed and they could not distinguish the letters. The tavern was emptied, and in the streets men paused to speak to one another of the beauty and matchless love of Christ.

"Ministers from other parts came to witness these wonders of Divine Grace. When they recounted them to their people, the Spirit used their testimony, often in a remarkable way. The fire spread thus from town to town and from county to county. It spread not only throughout New England; it passed also to other lands."

About the time of the awakening in New England there was a remarkable revival among the American Indians, under the leadership of David Brainerd, the apostle to the Indians. It was one of the notable spiritual awakenings in the history of the Christian Church. When Brainerd first began his work among the Indians, he had little success. His health became impaired. He retired from the work for a time. He was offered a pastorate among "wealthy and kindly people," and his heart went out in love toward the daughter of Jonathan Edwards. But day-by-day he heard in his soul the pitiful cries of the poor lost Indians who were so degraded and steeped in sin.

He made the great decision. He deliberately gave up a life of ease and comfort, and went back into the wilderness to proclaim the gospel to "his poor Indians." With dauntless heroism he went from place to place preaching to various Indian tribes.

bes. His tours among the tribes covered "more than three thousand miles, through forests, over dangerous mountains, in fierce rains, and freezing cold."

As time went on Brainerd realized more and more, that it was only through the mighty power of God, and the fire falling from heaven, that the hardened hearts of the stolid Indians could be changed. He decided to give himself unreservedly to intercessory prayer. It is said that "whole nights were spent in agonizing prayer in the dark woods, his clothes drenched with the sweat of his travail." As the result of such intense fervent intercession it is little wonder that the windows of heaven were opened and the fire fell. Mr. Shearer tells the thrilling story:

"Suddenly, the Spirit was outpoured upon the whole region of the Susquehanna. His first audience there had consisted of four women and a few children. Now there came streaming in upon him from all sides a host of men and women, who pressed upon him, and grasping the bridle of his horse, besought him with intense earnestness to tell them the way of salvation. In a great, glad wonder he looked upon them, and the text that leaped to his lips was, 'Herein is love.'

"Men fell at his feet in anguish of soul. These were men who could bear the most acute torture without flinching. But God's arrow had now pierced them; their pain could not be concealed and they cried out in their distress, 'have mercy upon me.' What impressed Brainerd most deeply was that though these people came to him in a multitude, each one was mourning apart. The prophecy of Zechariah was fulfilled before his eyes. The woods were filled with the sound of a great mourning, and beneath the Cross every man fell as if he and the Saviour God alone were there. Gradually as the missionary spoke, there came to them, one by one, the peace and comfort of the Gospel.

"As the days passed he had full proof that a heaven-sent revival had come. A passion for righteousness possessed the converts. The wretched victims of the 'fire-water' were delivered, and the Indian camps were cleansed at once from their physical and moral filthiness. The love of Christ expelled every unlovely thing. As one poor woman expressed it, 'Me to be Him for all,' became the motto of their lives. They became themselves ardent missionaries of the Cross. The light spread through all that dark region, and a strong Indian Church was established."

In another land across the sea the fire fell from heaven in answer to earnest intercessory prayer. In the early part of the eighteenth century the spiritual life of the people of Great Britain was at a low ebb. Moral and spiritual declension was much the same as in America and Great Britain at the present time.

But John Wesley and George Whitefield and others of like mind, were not content to let conditions remain in a state of stagnation. They were men of vision, men of faith, men of prayer. They began to cry to God for an outpouring of His Spirit. Whole nights were spent in intercessory prayer. At length the fire of God fell upon them in the early morning hours of one of these all-night prayer meetings. Wesley in his Journal tells what happened: "About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground."

Filled with the Spirit of God, Wesley and Whitefield and others went everywhere preaching the gospel. Like a gale from heaven they went up and down the British Isles preaching to vast multitudes sometimes numbering 20,000 and more. Their zeal for souls was so great that they came over to America and helped greatly in evangelising our new land. The Rt. Hon. Lloyd George, British Prime Minister during the first world war, declared that the revival under Wesley changed the history of the British Isles.

Here in America, before the middle of the last century, there was a man of God who believed that prevailing prayer would open the windows of heaven and bring down the heavenly fire in the form of a mighty revivals. He was Charles G. Finney, a Spirit-filled lawyer. He and "Father Nash," and Abel Cleary and others, prevailed in prayer.

For many years Charles G. Finney and his associates went up and down the land conducting revival meetings. Great multitudes were saved, and Christians were quickened in their faith. Prayer was the keynote and cornerstone of Finney's work. In speaking of the spirit of prayer that came upon the people in connection with his meetings, Finney said: "The spirit of prayer that prevailed in those revivals was a very marked feature of them. It was common for young converts to be greatly exercised in prayer.

"Not only were prayer meetings greatly multiplied and fully attended, not only was there great solemnity in those meetings, but there was a mighty spirit of secret prayer. Christians prayed a great deal--many of them would spend hours in private prayer. It was also the case that two or more would take the promise: '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,' and make some particular person

a subject of prayer; and it was wonderful to what an extent they prevailed. Answers to prayer were so manifestly multiplied on every side, that no one could escape the conviction that God was daily and hourly answering prayer.

Finney further said: "If anything occurred to threaten to hurt the work, if there was an appearance of any root of bitterness springing up, or any tendency to fanaticism or disorder, Christians would take the alarm, and give themselves to prayer that God would direct and control all things, and it was surprising to see to what extent, and by what means, God would remove obstacles out of the way in answer to prayer.

"Prayer is an essential link in the chain of causes that lead to a revival just as much as truth is. Some have zealously used truth to convert men, and laid very little stress upon prayer. They have preached, and talked, and distributed tracts with great zeal and then wondered why they had so little success. And the reason was that they had forgotten to use the other branch of the means, EFFECTUAL PRAYER. They overlooked the fact that truth by itself will never produce the effect, without the Spirit of God, and that, the Spirit is given in answer to earnest prayer."

On one occasion Finney went to Rochester, New York, to hold a series of revival meetings. Abel Cleary went to Rochester also, but not to attend the meetings. He rented a room, and while Finney preached Abel Cleary prayed. He interceded with God in an agony for souls. The Spirit of God was poured out mightily upon that city. Practically every lawyer in Rochester was converted. And the revival fires swept east and west and north and south throughout the land.

Rev. John Shearer in his book on revival says: "Sometimes the blessing spread like a fire with marvellous rapidity, and in every direction. The northern portion of Pennsylvania was then known as 'the lumber region.' Here a vast number of scattered households dwelt in almost heathen darkness. A great awakening took place in Philadelphia, under Finney's ministry, and some of the lumbermen, coming down to the city with their wood, heard the message and carried a spark of the fire back to the great forests. There it caught, and spread in an astonishing manner. In a region where there was not a single minister settled, 5000 people were converted in a short time."

The climax of the great awakening was reached in 1857. Ministers called upon their people to pray earnestly for revival to meet the onslaught of evil that was sweeping over the land. Prayer meetings to intercede for an outpouring of God's Spirit and for the salvation of souls sprang up everywhere.

Mr. Shearer tells how the fire fell from heaven and of the glorious results that followed:

"In answer to the Church's united cry, ascending from all parts of the land, the Spirit of God, in a very quiet way, and suddenly, throughout the whole extent of the United States, renewed the Church's life, and awakened in the community a round it a great thirst for God. When the Church awoke to the full consciousness of the miracle, it found that from east to west, and from north to south, the whole land was alive with daily prayer meetings. And it was in these daily united prayer meetings that the great majority of these conversions, of all ages and classes, took place. "The divine fire appeared in the most unlikely quarters. A large number of the aged were gathered in. White-haired penitents knelt with little children at the Throne of Grace. Whole families of Jews were brought to their Messiah. Deaf mutes were reached by the glad tidings, and though their tongues were still, their faces so shone that they became effective messengers of the gospel. The most hardened infidels were melted, some being led to Christ by the hand of a little child.

"Nor was the blessing confined to the land. The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, and a multitude of seamen saw a great light. It was as if a vast cloud of blessing hovered over the land and sea. And ships, as they drew near the American ports, came within the zone of heavenly influence. Ship after ship arrived with the same tale of sudden conviction and conversion. It was wonderful beyond words! In one ship a captain and the entire crew of thirty men found Christ out at sea and entered the harbour rejoicing.

"The North Carolina--a battleship of the United States Navy--lay in the harbour of New York. Her complement was about a thousand men. Amongst these were four Christians who discovered their spiritual kinship and agreed to meet for prayer. They were permitted to use a very retired part of the ship, on a deck far below the water line. Here, then, they gathered one evening. They were only four men, but they were a united band. They represented three denominations, one being an Episcopalian, another a Presbyterian, while two were Baptists.

"As they knelt in the dim light of a tiny lamp, the Spirit of God suddenly filled their hearts with such joy of salvation that they burst into song. The strange sweet strain rose to the decks above, and there created great astonishment. Their ungodly shipmates came running down. They came to mock, but the mighty power of God had been liberated by rejoicing faith. It gripped them, and in one moment their derisive laugh was changed into the cry of penitent sinners! Great fellows,

giants in stature, and many of them giants in sin, were literally smitten down, and knelt humbly beside the four, like little children.

"A most gracious work straightway began in the depths of the great ship. Night after night the prayer meeting was held, and conversions took place daily. Soon they had to send ashore for help, and ministers joyfully came out to assist. A large number were added to the various churches, and the battleship became a veritable House of God! The North Carolina was a receiving ship, from which men were constantly drafted to other ships.

"The converts of the revival were scattered throughout the navy. A revival convert is a burning brand. The holy fire spread rapidly from ship to ship. Wherever the converts went they started a prayer meeting and became a soul-winning band. Thus ship after ship left the harbour of New York for foreign seas, each carrying its band of rejoicing converts, and the fire of God was borne to the ends of the earth."

Dr. Frank G. Beardsley in his History of American Revivals speaks of the numerical results of the revival of 1857: "For a period of six to eight weeks, when the revival was at its height, it was estimated that fifty thousand persons were converted weekly throughout the country, and as the revival lasted for more than a year, it becomes evident that the sum total of conversions reached a figure that was enormous. Conservative judges have placed the number of converts, in this great spiritual awakening, at five hundred thousand."