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The Pattern For Revival

by Stephen Olford

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Reading: 2 Chronicles 7:12-14; Deuteronomy 11:13-14, NKJV.

Many years ago as a young theological student, I often sat under the preaching of that mighty prince of expositors, Dr. G. Campbell Morgan. On one memorable evening he made this statement as he spoke on the theme of revival: "God is sovereign and supernatural in His work of revival. We can't manipulate Him or His workings any more than we can manipulate the breezes in the treetops." Then quoting from John 3 he explained that the new birth, like the wind, comes where it wills and goes where it desires. "You hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). And he added, "We cannot organize revival, but we can set our sails to catch the wind from heaven when God chooses to blow upon His people once again." So what I want to do is to give you a pattern for setting the sails.

The words of our text are related to the dedication of King Solomon's temple. That in itself is significant because it has to do with God's people-- "If My people who are called by My name" (v. 14). Throughout the history of the church this wonderful text has been the embodiment of what people have understood as the pattern for revival. The challenge to you and me is this: Are we prepared to follow that pattern?

Have you ever knelt before God and prayed, "Lord, search my motives. Put your light upon my motives. Why am I asking for revival? What are the terms on which You will send revival?" I believe we can find a threefold answer from our text:

The Problems That Hinder Revival

"If My people who are called by My name" (v. 14). If it be asked why there is no revival, why heaven is shut up, the answer is you and me. In 2 Chronicles 6:26 we read: "Heaven is shut up and there is no rain because we have sinned." That is a reference to Deuteronomy 11:13-14 where God says, "It shall be that if you diligently obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season"--at the right time, at the right moment. What was the sin of God's people in the light of that text? It was the sin of failure to hear God, to love God and to serve God. Let's look at those for a moment:

The sin of failure to hear God-- "If you diligently obey" (Deut. 11:13). The verb bears the meaning "to hear with a view to taking action." God speaks to His people, but are we listening? God speaks in two ways. He speaks in a direct way and He speaks in a declared way. He speaks through the direct Word--through one's personal devotions. Jesus expressed it perfectly when He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Strangely, yet significantly, enough, that "word" is not "logos" but "rhema." It is one thing to have your Bible on your desk, studying it exegetically for preparing sermons. It is another thing to have your Bible there for personal devotions.

Jesus is talking here about the word spoken to you and me directly. When our Lord faced temptation in the wilderness throughout those forty days and forty nights, He listened to His Father each morning. God spoke to Him from the book of Deuteronomy. Why Deuteronomy? Because that was the book that was always read before the armies of Israel went into battle. As the devil attacked Jesus He replied, "It is written," "It is written," "It is written" (Matt. 4:4,7,10). Each time Jesus drew His sword from the words that proceeded out of the mouth of God (the rhema) and the devil left Him for a season.

Has it occurred to you that the Lord Jesus, in His perfect humanity, never missed His quiet time? Study Isaiah 50:4 and

and 7 carefully. Each morning His ears were open as a disciple to hear His Father's voice and to do His Father's will. We learn also from Mark 1:35 that following a very heavy program of preaching and healing the Lord Jesus arose early-- "a long while before daylight...and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed." G. Campbell Morgan points out He prayed "as was His custom." That mountainside was His quiet spot to pray.

It is estimated that, in this country, the average time a pastor spends in prayer is ten minutes a day or less. Is it any wonder we're in such a mess? We get our messages in all kinds of ways: through books we read, possibly television programs, but what about that direct voice? Can we say God spoke to me through His Word today? I am not talking about some ecstatic, fanciful hearing of a voice. I am talking about God speaking through His Word by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Failure to spend time to hear God, in my judgment, is sin and is a reason why God has shut up heaven.

But there is not only the direct Word, there is the declared Word. Paul tells Timothy to "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." He admonishes him: "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them" (1 Tim. 4:13-16).

As members of the local church, we are to receive the Word of God through God-ordained channels. Have you ever studied Hebrews 13:17 where the writer says: "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." Here we have a word to church members: "Obey"--that's doctrine; "submit"--that's discipline, and we do well to take that advice to heart.

Preachers, has it ever occurred to you that your task, under God, is to call for undeviating, uncompromising obedience to what you preach? Your task is to challenge your audience to obey. If your hearers choose not to obey that is their problem.

For all of us who are ministers, God speaks through His Word. St. Augustine said, "When the Scriptures speak God speaks." This is one of the first things we teach preachers at the Stephen Olford Center in Memphis. We remind them that they are the mouthpiece of God on a text rightly exegeted and interpreted. When God speaks you obey; failure to obey is sin and rebellion.

The sin of failure to love God-- "Diligently obey My commandments...to love the Lord your God" (Deut. 11:13). Failure to hear God leads to failure to love God, which is another problem that hinders revival. To love God is essentially a life of obedience. Partial obedience is total disobedience. Just as it was true of the Law, so it is true of the Word of God. If we "keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, guilty of all" (James 2:10). Is your obedience up-to-date? You say, "Is that really an expression of love?" Jesus declared, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). The Greek text here reads, "If you love Me you will keep My commandments."

No passage stirs my heart with conviction like our Lord's letter to the Ephesian church. Here is a church that was sound in doctrine, sound in duty, sound in discipline; yet the risen Lord had to lament, "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Rev. 2:4). Unless there is repentance and a return to doing the first works He has no choice but to remove the candlestick of witness. That spells death to a local church. Yes, the choir will gather, the trumpet will sound, the ritual and routine will go on. All the various branches of the church will continue to operate, but Jesus will not be there. Why? Because the church has left its first love. Jesus announced that the first commandment constituted the greatest commandment, namely, to love God. If that is true, then to break that commandment constitutes the greatest sin.

Then, again, there is the sin of failure to serve God-- "Serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 11:13). Serving God means being committed to the task that He has appointed us to do with fervency and faithfulness. When confronted by the devil in the wilderness, the Lord Jesus answered Satan, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve" (Matt. 4:10).

Each of us must ask himself: Am I wholly serving the Lord? I believe that God has a plan for every life; otherwise Ephesians 2:10 makes no sense whatever-- "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." My task, under the sovereignty of the Spirit, is to find that plan, to follow that plan, and to finish that plan. You say, "Yes, but it is my church I am serving; it is my Christian organization I am serving; through my volunteer work I am serving Jesus." Let me ask this: Has that anything to do with the will of God? Has it really been appointed by Him in such a clear fashion that you know what the will of God is?

In that magnificent chapter on the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15), the apostle Paul, having dealt with the fact, the faith, and the force of the resurrection, now concludes with those challenging words: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (v. 58). Notice it does not say "for the Lord" but "of the Lord." We can be working for the Lord but not doing the work of the Lord which is derived from God, in terms of guidance, leading, and empowerment. We need to know that what we do is of God; it is God working out His resurrection life in me through Jesus Christ--working through my eyes, my brain, my hands, my feet, my personality.

What, then, are the problems that hinder revival? Failure to hear God, failure to love God, failure to serve God, and we must be very personal in confessing those sins to God.

But let me take you deeper into 2 Chronicles 7:14. The second movement deals with:

The Process That Hastens Revival

"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven" (v. 14). What is the process of revival? It is a mindset occasioned by a Spirit-wrought repentance which expresses itself in:

Brokenness-- "If My people...will humble themselves" (v. 14). That word humble, in the original, is found in Judges 8:28 where we read that Midian was subdued under Gideon "so that they lifted their heads no more." It is a brokenness before God--something we need desperately in our individual lives, in our churches, and in our nation.

As we study the Scriptures we learn that God respects the brokenhearted. The psalmist says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart...God...will not despise" (Ps. 51:17). God relieves the brokenhearted-- "The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit" (Ps. 34:18); and yet again, "God revives the brokenhearted-- "Thus says the High and Lofty One... 'I will dwell...with him who has a contrite and humble spirit'" (Isa. 57:15).

It was my privilege to know Evan Roberts of the Welsh Revival. On September 29, 1904, Roberts heard a tremendous sermon delivered by Seth Joshua in which Joshua repeated the words "Lord, bend us! Lord, bend us!" The Spirit of God used that simple statement to break Evan Roberts's heart. The following Monday night 17 young people in his Bible class responded after hearing Roberts tell them: "You must put away all unconfessed sin; you must put away any doubtful habit; you must obey the Spirit promptly; and you must confess Christ publicly." God's Spirit was poured out upon His servant and the effects were felt throughout the Principality of Wales. One hundred thousand were converted within six months. Eventually that revival touched England, Ireland, the United States--especially Kentucky. It leaped across the Pacific to India. It had an effect in South Africa, and was preparatory to all missionary work in South America. But the key was that Evan Roberts first had to be broken. Such brokenness before God brings revival.

The late Bishop Festo Kivengere was an African revivalist. On one occasion I asked him to tell me why the East African revival in Rwanda/Uganda lasted over forty years. Supremely, of course, it was God at work; but specifically, he said, "There were two reasons. One was making sure I was walking in the light every day and that my brother was doing the same. If I saw anyone looking glum I would say to them, 'Brother/Sister, are you walking in the light?' If they had no answer I would add, 'Then you are in the bushes.' The biblical example of that is Adam. When Adam ceased to walk in the light he hid in the bushes. So Africans would confess their sins to one another and get right with God so that they could continue to walk in the light. The other secret," Kivengere added, "was brokenness." To make his point he asked, "Have you ever tried to put two balloons together when they're inflated? The tendency is for the balloons to bounce off each other. But watch what happens when you puncture them: they just fall all over one another. Too often Christians are lifted up with pride, but when their hearts are humbled by the Spirit of God, and they pray and seek His face, then it is comparatively easy to fall all over one another in love and to find forgiveness at the foot of the cross."

With brokenness there must be prayerfulness-- "If My people...will humble themselves, and pray" (v. 14). Too often we pray for revival from wrong and selfish motives so that we will go down in history as another Jonathan Edwards, a Charles Finney, or a Jonathan Goforth. The praying talked about here is praying with transparency: "Lord, blot me out, but send revival!" Would to God that there were little groups all across our country who were praying selflessly in that fashion! Without exception, and without regard for any other factors whatsoever, each and every one of the great revivals in history has been steeped in prayer.

But once again, there must be earnestness-- "If My people...will...seek My face" (v. 14). That powerful verb seek means "to search after with earnestness." I think of Jacob who would not let go of that divine Wrestler until the blessing came. But God had to first touch the very sinew of his thigh--the center of his self-life, so to speak. A man can't fight, a man can't flee, when he can't stand. God takes no pleasure in the legs of a man, the psalmist says (Ps. 147:10). When our legs give way then we begin to cling and we cry out in earnest, "I will not let You go unless You bless me" (Gen. 32:26).

Recall the earnestness of the neighbor who came to his friend at midnight to beg for bread. His friend refused, saying he was in bed, his children were asleep, and he could not come to the door. But because the knock was persistent the friend eventually arose. Earnestness brought the reward (see Luke 11:5-8). Are we prepared to pray and not be daunted, deflected, or distracted until we achieve the answer to our prayers?

So the process of revival is brokenness, prayerfulness, earnestness; and then supremely, holiness-- "If My people...turn from their wicked ways" (v. 14). With few exceptions there is no holiness in our land today; yet God says, "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16). That is not an option; it's a command. The writer to the Hebrews urges us to "pursue...holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14); and Paul urges us to lift up holy hands in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8). Holiness is not only a divine gift, but also a divine growth in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Tell me, Are you holy in your thought life, holy in your speech life, holy in your private life, holy in your married life, holy in your business life? Holiness is an unknown entity today, and yet that is the reason we were called by God.

A framed prayer by Robert Murray McCheyne hangs on my study wall and echoes my own heart-cry: "O God, make me as holy as a saved sinner can be." That is a transforming prayer to pray.

The Promise That Heralds Revival

"Then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (v. 14). The promise that heralds revival is threefold and we need to examine each aspect with great expectation. There is first of all:

The promise of divine visitation-- "I will hear from heaven" (v. 14). Divine visitation can mean one of two things--either judgment or revival. Judgment can be penal or it can be remedial. Romans 1 is a dark chapter. It talks about the way men have "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things" (v. 23). As a result we read that "God gave them up," "God gave them up," "God gave them over" (Rom. 1:24,26,28). Sometimes God sends judgment now, rather than later.

Peter reminds us that "judgment ... begins at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). We tend to blame the world for our ills, but forget that we are called to be salt and light in the world. When the light has lost its luster, and salt has lost its "tang," the world will go into darkness and corruption.

The risen Lord had to say to a lukewarm, Laodicean church: "Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth" (Rev. 3:16). And I declare there are spewed out churches all over our country today, and they do not even know it! Yes, God can answer in judgment.

But He can visit in revival, too. There is:

The promise of divine absolution-- "I will...forgive their sin" (v. 14). Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, commenting on this text, says that the greatest gift God can give men and women is forgiveness, for without forgiveness there is nothing else that can transpire in our lives. An unforgiving spirit is a block to personal revival and can hinder revival corporately. Of course, we can't be forgiven unless we repent. Jesus conditioned forgiveness on forgiving. He declared, "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15). It is not enough to say "My brother, I forgive you." There must be true brokenness, repentance, and then forgiveness. Where there is evidence of genuine forgiveness, in times of revival, three wonderful things happen:

First, there is a spirit of happiness-- "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered...and in whose spirit there is no guile" (Ps. 32:1). Such a person is blessed, happy, praising the Lord. Second, there is a spirit of awe and solemnity-- "There is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Ps. 130:4). Third, there is a spirit of tenderness-- "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).

Is God saying a word to you about your pastor, your fellow member, your neighbor, your spouse, your children--somebody that you have not forgiven? somebody that has not forgiven you? The Bible says, "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24). This is business with God. Forgiveness is part of the pattern we must follow.

Finally, there is:

The promise of divine restoration-- "I will...heal their land" (v. 14). We want healing in our land. What was physical and natural, in the Old Testament, is spiritual now; but there can be healing which is physical, too. God is waiting to heal broken homes, dysfunctional families, and smashed lives. Revival always heals.

Vance Havner, in his book Repent or Else, wrote that "the greatest need of the church today is not more members, more buildings, or more money. The supreme issue is not even missions or evangelism. It is repentance and revival. We are so busy building bigger orchestras that we cannot stop to tune our instruments;...Just as we are often too busy to have a physical checkup, so the church is often too occupied to submit to spiritual examination. Yet we never needed it more."

Are you prepared to obey the laws that govern the pattern of revival? The text reads: "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (v. 14). This is the pattern for revival.