

**Articles and Sermons :: Praying for revival -ellsworth**

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Praying for revival

by Roger Ellsworth

Revival is a time when God's people are moved to a higher level of prayer. Prayer is one of the indispensable means God uses to revive his people. There is no revival without it.

Jonathan Edwards offered this observation about God's dealings with his people: 'When he is about to bestow some great blessing on his church, it is often his manner, in the first place, so to order things in his providence, as to show his church their need of it, and to bring them into distress for want of it, and so put them upon crying earnestly to him for it'.

Many Scriptures connect revival and prayer. The prophecy of Isaiah includes a long prayer for revival (Isaiah 63:15-64:12). Close examination of this prayer will cause us to examine ourselves. Are we praying for a mighty moving of God in our midst? If we want God to send revival, we must earnestly pray.

What kind of praying ought we to be doing? What kind of praying does God delight to hear and answer? What constitutes revival praying?

Corporate prayer

Revival praying is, firstly, corporate praying. In other words, God wants his people to gather together and pray.

It is truly astonishing how little time is given to prayer in the average church these days. Many Christians seem to be more concerned about prayer in schools than about prayer in churches!

Jonathan Edwards, recognising the importance of corporate praying, wrote a treatise entitled *Humble attempt to promote explicit and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer for revival*. That is actually a shortened version of the title, which consisted of 187 words!

Edwards was calling for prayer that is explicit in agreement—united and extraordinary. He was calling believers to agree on the need for praying for revival, to gather publicly to do so, and to do so in an extraordinary way—that is, to select special times for prayer and give unusual time and effort to it.

Edwards had a scriptural basis for making this plea, for Zechariah 8:20-21 declares:

This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come,
and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say,
'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty.
I myself am going.'

Private prayer

Secondly, corporate prayer does not negate the need for private prayer. Edwards also makes the point: 'There is no way that Christians in a private capacity can do so much to promote the work of God and advance the kingdom of Christ, as by prayer... if they have much of the spirit of grace and supplication, in this way they may have power with him who is infinite in power and has the government of the whole world. A poor man in his cottage may have a blessed influence all over the world'.

James, using the example of Elijah, assures us that 'the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much' (James 5:16).

As we think about the wonderful things God did in Elijah's time, we may well find ourselves inclined to ask: 'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?' (2 Kings 2:14). Is he waiting for his people to feel the burden of the times and call on him as Elijah did?

It is not enough, however, to merely say that we are to pray corporately and privately for revival. We must consider the kind of prayer we are to offer.

Urgent and fervent

First, we are to pray urgently and fervently. This element stands out in Isaiah's revival prayer cited earlier, in which he uses the word 'beseech' (Isaiah 64:9, AV).

'Beseech' is much stronger than 'ask' or 'request'. It is a fervent and passionate word. It has sweat on its brow and grime on its hands. It means to entreat, to implore, to beg, to plead. There is no easy-going moderation in this word.

Isaiah's prayer was urgent and fervent because it flowed from a keen sense that his people had been impoverished by sin and that only God could restore what had been lost. It was urgent and fervent because Isaiah understood that the God who had worked on behalf of his people in former times was able to do so again.

We also have been brought low through sin but God can restore what has been lost. If we believe these things we will have no trouble praying urgently and fervently.

Persistent

We must also pray persistently. Isaiah speaks of giving God no rest until he makes his people 'a praise in the earth' (Isaiah 62:7).

Some are troubled by this. Why should we be persistent in prayer? If God knows we need something, why does he not just give it to us? The answer is that God wants us to be persistent for our own good.

Benefits easily gained are not duly prized. What has been won by toil is more likely to be guarded diligently, while that which comes easily may be carelessly squandered. If revival comes through persistent praying, we are likely to prize and guard its benefits.

Confident

Finally, we may be confident in prayer. When we pray for revival we are praying for something that God has promised to give his people from time to time. We need only to turn to Isaiah's prophecy again to find one such promise:

I will pour water on him who is thirsty,
And floods on the dry ground;
I will pour My Spirit on your descendants,
And my blessing on your offspring (Isaiah 44.3)

The question is whether we are thirsty for God's reviving work. The promise is for the thirsty. As long as we are content as we are, we shall not experience revival. May God help us to get thirsty.