

Yes, our vision must be keenest
Our faith must be truest
Where streets are the meanest
Where souls cry out for justice

No better words have we
Than when he came unto his own
Spoken by the Man of Galilee
A prophet unwelcome in his home

Propelled under the Spirit's anointing
Bringing good news to the poor
Father, Son, and Spirit appointing
You and me to proclaim God's cure

To a world oppressed
To open blinded eyes
To bring the weary rest
Bathed in showers from God's skies

Jesus Christ was put to death
Just this side of Smokey
While the Spirit lends us breath
The Spirit whispers: "Go Ye"
While thrown away children wept
The Spirit whispers: "Go Ye"
While the happy and contented slept
The Spirit whispers: "Go Ye"
Sin, however perverse and foul and deep
God's love is a deeper depth
The Spirit whispers: "Go Ye"

Preparation for Revival

by John M. Nielson

I have been asked to speak today about Preparing for Revival, giving special consideration to the issue of prayer and fasting as part of that preparation. I want us to come to understand what we mean by revival and what the Bible tells us about how to prepare for it. Obviously, we can't say all that can or should be said on these topics, but I hope we can discover enough that will help us prepare our own hearts for the moving of God's Spirit among us.

Revival is 1) The spiritual renewal and deepening of believers, 2) The return of those who have wandered from being close to God, 3) The evangelism of those who are not yet born again, 4) The equipping of believers for the work of evangelism. It may occur as 1) An individual, personal event, 2) A series of

meetings at the church, 3) An ongoing experience in the regular life of the church, 4) A sweeping national event under the moving of God's Spirit.

In the Old Testament Revival usually refers to the repentance of God's people and their return to faithful service of God. It is often national in character. Fasting (along with the wearing of sackcloth) is sometimes used as an outward sign of humility and repentance. Among the passages that express the yearning for revival are the following:

"Will you not revive us again that your people may rejoice in you?" (Ps. 85:6)

". . . Till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field becomes a forest. Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field." (Is. 32:15-16)

"Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: 'We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.'" (Lam. 3:40)

"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously that we may offer the fruit of our lips.'" (Hos. 14:2)

Virtually every Old Testament reference to revival includes the ideas of repentance and of return to the Lord. Specifically, the revival in Josiah's day (II Kings 23) has the following characteristics:

1. Rediscovery of the Word of God lost in the House of God (23:2)

The young King Josiah ordered the cleaning and restoration of God's Temple. In the process, the workmen found a copy of the Law of God. Upon reading it, Josiah realized how far his people had strayed from obedient service to Yahweh.

For me, the special tragedy of this story is the fact that God's Word was lost in God's House. While at first glance, that might seem impossible today, an honest examination will reveal that all too often it is precisely among those who call themselves Christians that the real message of the Gospel gets lost under layers of neglect, of careless interpretation, and of bad theology.

Revival always begins with a rediscovery of the truth of God's Word, its relevance for our lives, and its call to the Gospel of Christ.

2. Humility and repentance (22:11)

The King's tearing of his clothes was one of those Old Testament symbols

of humility and repentance. It was in that context that Joel cried out, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." (Joel 2:13) As we shall see in a few moments, humility before God and repentance for our sin are preconditions for revival.

3. Covenant of obedience (23:3)

Revival cannot occur where there is resistance to God's requirements and expectations. The same Jesus who gives us the welcome news, "Your sins are forgiven" also tells us to "Go and sin no more." Revival always demands both messages.

4. Removal of Idols (other gods) (23:4)

Here is another of those biblical images that we think only applies to the heathen context. But we need to realize that even we who are servants of God can begin to worship the gods of materialism, success, status, security, etc. Revival means getting rid of any of the gods in our lives and serving God alone.

Another of the classic passages on revival is found in God's response to Solomon upon the dedication of the temple. "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 will I hear from heaven and will heal their land. (2 Chron. 7:14)

A. These words are directed to God's People

It is important to note that this message is not directed to the heathen in the surrounding nations but to the chosen people of God. When we think of revival only in terms of evangelism, when we focus only on what other people need to confess, when we believe revival will come if only we can get the unbelievers to attend our services, then I am afraid we have missed what is central to revival. Revival among God's people will bear the evangelistic fruit we seek.

B. We bear responsibility for Revival.

It is also interesting that the passage begins with what we are to do. Let's look briefly at these four items.

1. We are to humble ourselves

It seems to me that this humbling of ourselves before God includes a number of aspects --

We must acknowledge God as God

Sometimes we do not realize how we try to usurp God's position and authority. Like Peter, we try to tell him what to do. We think that we can save people and build the church. We want God to do our bidding. Humility means that we recognize God as Creator and ourselves as creatures -- God as Master, ourselves as servants.

We must stop seeking our own advantage

What is the true focus of our lives? Am I seeking to advance God's Kingdom or seeking to advance my own career? Am I seeking the spiritual growth of our people or the growth of my own reputation? Am I seeking to lead God's lambs or to use the flock to my own advantage? Am I seeking to do God's will or to get others to do my will? The key to revival lies in practicing that humility that seeks God's Kingdom, not our own. If we are seeking our own advantage in life and through the church, then we have become one of the hindrances to revival.

We must deny self

The tearing of their clothes, the wearing of sackcloth and ashes, and the discipline of fasting were all ways in which the people of the Old Covenant demonstrated their humility before God. There is self-denial in letting God be God. There is self-denial in refusing to seek our own welfare. But there is also value in those forms of self-denial that remind me, and show God that I am serious about revival.

We must admit our need

This does not come easily for saved and sanctified preachers. And yet, one of the greatest hindrances to revival is spiritual pride. Do you remember the story Jesus told?

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Luke 18:10-14 RSV

Is there sin in our lives? Is there failure in our ministry? Is there weakness

that needs to be confessed before the Father? If we hide our own needs behind self-righteousness or misconstrued holiness we become obstacles to the revival we seek. Spiritual pride that makes it impossible for God's Spirit to show us ourselves and to teach us new truth makes revival impossible.

2. We are to pray

I do not claim to understand the mystery and miracle of prayer. I do know that God uses it to accomplish his purposes among us. I know that we need it if we are to be what God wants us to be. (We will return to this topic shortly).

3. We are to seek God's face

Here is an echo of the cry of the Psalmist. "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, Lord, will I seek!" (Ps. 27:8). "Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved." (Ps. 80:3). "Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always." (Ps. 105: 4).

We are to seek God's face in God's Word

We have already referred to the importance of rediscovering the Word. It is only there that we will come face to face with the Savior. And it is in his face that we will see the face of the Father.

We are to seek God's face in our Worship

There is no reason that revival should not break out in the regular services of our congregations. If we will take worship seriously and seek the presence of God in our services, the spirit of revival will descend upon us. When our people come to church they must see the face of the living Christ or all we do is vain.

We are to seek God's face in our Walk

We are called Christians and that means we are called to be Christlike. In our daily walk with God, we must recognize his face. And in that daily walk, others must see his face in us. As Evie sings, "Until you find Him in your mirror you've got a long way to go."

We must not be content with knowing about God. We must come to know God. One commentator states that this phrase refers to coming into the presence of God. For three months we communicated with our daughter by letters. We talked with her on the phone. It was even better when we saw her face and heard her talk directly to us on a video tape. But none of that compared to the moment when she walked off the plane in Manila and into our arms and into our lives! Something of that is what is wrapped up in this matter of seeking the face of God.

4. We are to turn from our evil ways

I wonder if God gets as tired of our services and our songs and our repetitious prayers as he did of the empty sacrifices in the Old Testament. I wonder if God gets weary of our smug complacency. I wonder if he ever wants to shake us and say, "Do you see how much like the world around you have become? Do you not see the bitterness and jealousy and selfishness and anger that have blown into your lives like small seeds that have taken root and are growing into trees? Do you not remember that I want obedience -- not sacrifices and songs and services? Do you not remember that I want Christlikeness, not religion?"

Before revival can come, we will need to pray with David, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Ps. 139:23-24). We, as pastors, and pastors' wives, and leaders of God's flock will have to lead the way in repentance and obedience.

C. Then We have God's promise that

God will Hear -- he has promised to - and hearing he will understand and answer.

And God will Forgive -- no one else could do it. No one else would do it. But he was dying to do it!

and God will Heal -- and oh, how we need healing for our hearts and our homes and our relationships and our congregations and our land!

There was also a revival that broke out in the early church. It is recorded in chapters 10 and 11 of Acts. Notice the reoccurrence of these themes we have been mentioning -- Cornelius was seeking the face of God. He was prayerful. He was obedient. He could admit his need for more of God. Peter was also at prayer. He was humble enough to accept new truth and to turn from the evil ways of racial conflict in which he was raised. He was obedient. He was humble enough to remind them to worship God alone. He preached the Word. And God heard! And God forgave! And God healed! And the Church grew!

With all of this discussion as background, let us now look more closely at our understanding of prayer and of fasting and of their purpose in our Christian walk.

What is the basic purpose of prayer? Is it to change God's mind? Is it to force God to do my will? Is it to cause God to override someone else's will? Is it a vending machine -- put in your peso, pull the lever, and take your blessing?

Or is prayer something quite different? Is it to help me hear God's voice? Is

it to change my mind to God's mind? Is it to help me find the strength to do God's will? Is it to let God know that I sense my own need?

What is the motive behind my fasting? Is it to impress others? (See Mt. 6: 16-18). Is it to force God to answer my prayer – my way? Is to twist God's arm or to force his hand? Or should I fast instead because God impresses me to? Because the burden is so great? Because I need to focus my own preparation? Because I need to demonstrate my seriousness? Because it is an act of humility, of repentance, of discipline? Is it the purpose of prayer and fasting to change God? Is it the purpose of prayer and fasting to change others? Is it the purpose of prayer and fasting to change things? Or is it the purpose of prayer and fasting to change me?

We seem to have become obsessed with the "name it and claim it" brand of "Christianity" – the Gospel of success, prosperity, wealth and health that says the only barrier between us and all our desires is our faulty faith and prayer. Is prayer that mechanistic? Are my prayers, and my dreams, and my will that pure? Maybe we need to rediscover prayer as the means of letting God get in touch with us to transform us and to accomplish his will in us.

When we lived in Pennsylvania, we had a warm relationship with our neighbors, George and Ruth. Ruth once told us about an illness that struck their new daughter, Susan. She was in quite critical condition, and the doctor's prognosis was not encouraging. Ruth told how she agonized before the Lord in prayer, pleading with God to spare the life of her daughter. "Lord, You know how much Susan means to me," she would pray. "You have to heal her. I don't know how I would live if I lost her." And yet, the more she prayed, the less hope there seemed to be for Susan.

Finally, as she prayed on, she seemed to sense that the Lord was speaking to her. She stopped pleading and started to listen. She said that the Lord began to show her that ever since Susan's birth she had begun to act as if she owned Susan in a way she had never felt about her son Bobby. Susan had become the center of her life. Her love for her husband had been pushed into the background. She had little time for Bobby.

As she began to recognize the topsy-turvy nature of her priorities, her prayer began to change. "O Lord, help me to be the mother I should be to Bobby and to be the wife that George needs. Forgive me for allowing my love for Susan to overshadow all other loves. Help me to get my priorities in balance. And if it means that in order for me to be the person I must be you have to take Susan from me, then she is yours." She loosened her grip. She changed her prayer. And Susan got well.

Sometimes our prayers are not answered because they are not realistic – because they are like asking God to make our mango tree produce pineapples

because we enjoy them more.

Sometimes our prayers are not answered because God knows better -- because we wouldn't really want God to answer them, like the man in this story.

Once upon a time there was a man who prayed a prayer something like this -- Heavenly Father, I really need your help. I waste so much time every day shaving. Would you please stop my beard from growing so I will have more time to do the important things of life. In fact, I would have more money if my hair would stop growing as well and I did not have to make these regular visits to the barber. (Of course, I'd be able to give more to the church!) While you're at it, cutting my toenails it a pain.

Speaking of pain, I've had this throbbing headache for weeks. The doctor says it's a tumor at the base of my skull. I believe that you could stop its growth. Please do, and ease this pain.

I also have a pain in my neck. It's Mrs. Grimes. She really bothers me with her bitter attitude and her sharp tongue. Would you stop her from bothering me!

I'm also having a hard time putting up with the noise in this house. The kids are always fighting and yelling. I don't think I can stand it much longer. Besides, this whole community is noisy. Would you help me move to a quieter neighborhood.

The Lord answered his prayer -- every one of his petitions -- instantly. His hair stopped growing. So did the tumor. Mrs. Grimes doesn't bother him any more. He doesn't hear the kids any longer. He has moved to a quieter neighborhood. They buried him there three days later!

Sometimes we pray as if revival will come if only all those wicked people will get right with God. Sometimes we pray as if revival will come if only we can push the right prayer and fasting buttons to get God to cooperate with our plans. Sometimes we pray as if revival will come if someone from outside our church will bring it in to us.

While recognizing that revival comes from God, maybe we ought to refocus our prayer and fasting and concentrate on the areas we can most directly affect: our own relationship to God. Our own relationship to others. Our own example. Our own family. Our own preaching. . . . Etc.

Properly understood and utilized, Prayer and Fasting will help us to rediscover God's Word. To develop a sense of humility and repentance. To become aware of any idols in our lives. To get our focus off our own interests. To capture a fresh glimpse of the face of Jesus. To bring our own will into harmony with

God's will. To redirect our preaching and our worship. To reach a new level of obedience. To remember that God alone is God.

Prayer like that may or may not change others or change things, or change circumstances, but it will at least change us!

That does not mean we stop praying for revival. That is the only place revival can start. And if it starts in the parsonage, it will spread through the congregation. And if it flows through the congregation, it will spread through the community.

That does not mean that we stop praying for others. But it does mean that we take care of the plank in our own eye first. It does mean that our intercessory prayer of faith for the salvation of another recognizes that God gives him as much free-will to accept or reject the love of Christ as God has given me -- that God will not force his or her conversion.

That does not mean that we stop praying prayers of petition. But it does mean that we pray thoughtfully, honestly, reasonably, and in ways that God can answer.

So let us pray for God's presence in our lives and services. For holy conviction upon those who need God. For personal renewal. For the courage to be obedient. For an outpouring of God's Spirit upon our congregation.

If we believe and trust, if we meet God's conditions, if we will humble ourselves before God, if we will pray, if we will seek God's face, if we will turn from our own failure and sin -- then God will Hear and Forgive and Heal -- and revival will be upon us!

May it be so, Dear Lord!