

Prayer for Revival: Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21
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Sunday, November 29, 2009

The passion of my life, and my desire for us as a church body, is summed up in our church mission statement, which says that we exist “to delight in the beauty of God’s greatness, to proclaim the truth of God’s Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world.” This vision excites me. These are things I yearn for. I long for this to be true of us more and more. But I want to tell you this morning, as a relatively young and inexperienced pastor, that I don’t know how to make this happen. So often I feel absolutely clueless and inadequate in this role that I’ve been given. And I can feel discouraged by that at times. But the benefit comes when this realization of my own inadequacies drives me to prayer. I am unable to produce the results I long to see, and therefore I must pray to the One who can accomplish these things. I can’t create in a person’s heart a desire for God. I can’t cause anyone to delight in the beauty of God’s greatness. I can’t accomplish that for myself or anyone else. So I must pray. I can’t proclaim the truth of God’s Word in a way that convicts and encourages and transforms. The Holy Spirit must be at work in the preaching of the Word for those things to happen. So I must pray. And I certainly cannot ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, here or anywhere, unless God is pouring out His grace abundantly to do so.

And therefore prayer is at the heart of Christian ministry and at the heart of the Christian life for each one of us, because the things that need to happen in our lives are miraculous things that only God can do. So I want to continue to consider the matter of prayer this morning, and I want to focus on praying for revival. That is one way to summarize what I’ve just said about our church mission statement and the realization that we cannot accomplish these things and therefore must offer them up as requests to God. Delighting in God, proclaiming His truth, igniting a passion for the Gospel—we could summarize all of this in the word revival. We are wanting God to revive us and to use us in making His glory known throughout this city and throughout the world. We don’t want to remain as we are. We want to change and grow. We want to see God for who He is and be radically changed as a result. And since we can’t effect these changes in ourselves or anyone else, we must pray. We must earnestly cry out to God to pour out His Spirit upon us, to revive us.

The quote from Jonathan Edwards that I read last week is so inspiring to me, and it motivates me to focus this sermon on

praying for revival. Edwards wrote, “When God has something very great to accomplish for his church, it is his will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of his people.” And then he goes on to write, “When [God] 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 great need of it, and to bring them into distress for want of it, and so to put them upon crying earnestly to him for it” (*Thoughts on the Revival*, Vol. 1, Works, pg. 426). I want us to see this morning that we are in desperate need of God’s power in our lives to revive us, and it’s my hope that we will cry earnestly to God for it. And what an exciting thing it would be to see God then glorify Himself in this city and beyond in such a way that the churches would be strengthened and believers would be remarkably sanctified and large numbers of unbelievers would be radically converted and marriages would be reconciled and families united and brothers and sisters in Christ would evidence profound love for one another and young people and old people would head to the unreached people groups of the world, and the ripple effect would reach to the ends of the earth and culminate in the fulfillment of the Great Commission and the return of Christ.

We can’t do any of this. But God will be greatly exalted as He stirs His people to pray, and then responds to those prayers in great power. My prayer this morning is that God will come and show us our need for Him and that we will cry out to Him to revive us.

Defining Revival

Let me start by trying to define revival a little further, and then we’ll turn to Paul’s prayers in the letter to the Ephesians which give us a model for how we ought to pray for revival. Ian Murray, in his very insightful and inspiring book, *Revival and Revivalism*, helps us to understand what real, God-centered revival is in contrast to man-centered revivalism that many of us may be very familiar with. Revivalism is based on techniques and methods used to stir up emotions and manipulate people in order to produce a certain response, a certain decision, a certain action. But real revival has been understood to be something that God does, and only God can do. Ian Murray writes, “Such is man’s state in sin that he cannot be saved without the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration, and the faith that results from it, are the gifts of God. Therefore, wherever conversions are multiplied, the cause is to be found not in men, nor in favourable conditions, but in the abundant influences of the Spirit of God that alone make the testimony of the church effective. No other explanation of revival is in harmony with the truths that are ‘the essence of the Christian

scheme—the utter depravity of man, the sovereignly-free grace of Jehovah, the divinity of Christ, the atonement in his blood, regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Spirit.” (21-22)

It’s not favourable conditions that bring about revival. It’s not the techniques of men that cause revival. It’s the Spirit of God that is effective in reviving a people. To further clarify this, Murray also says that “what happens in revivals is not to be seen as something miraculously different from the regular experience of the church. The difference lies in degree, not in kind. In an ‘outpouring of the Spirit’ spiritual influence is more widespread, convictions are deeper, and feelings more intense, but all this is only a heightening of normal Christianity. True revivals are ‘extraordinary,’ yet what is experienced at such times is not different in essence from the spiritual experience that belongs to Christians at other times. It is the larger ‘earnest’ of the same Spirit who abides with all those who believe.” (23) So when we pray for revival, it’s not as though we’re praying for something different than what we’ve already experienced to some extent. But it’s that we want much more of it.

And this is what we see in Paul’s prayers, so let’s turn now to Ephesians 1:15-23. Last week we looked at the end of Ephesians, and Paul’s instructions about prayer and the fight of faith in chapter 6. Today we’ll look, not at instruction about prayer, but actual prayers that Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus. The first is in chapter 1, and then another appears in chapter 3. And in these two prayers there are four aspects of praying for revival that I want to highlight.

Giving Thanks to God

The first aspect of praying for revival that I want to focus on is giving thanks to God. Look at verses 15-16, “For this reason,[referring to what he has said in the previous verses about God’s sovereignty in choosing them and saving them] because I have heard of your *faith* in the Lord Jesus and your *love* toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.”

What I want us to notice is that Paul gives thanks to God for the faith and love of these saints. He doesn’t say thank you to the saints, thanking them for their faith and love. Not that it’s wrong to say thank you to people. But Paul is here thinking of their faith and their love, and because he knows that these things are the work of God in their lives, he is thanking God. Paul prays to God, thanking Him for what has happened in the lives of these saints who once had no inclination toward faith in Jesus Christ and had no love for one another. What has happened in their lives is nothing short of a miracle. Something supernatural has happened!

And when we look around and see people who trust in Jesus Christ, and who love all the saints, that is reason for rejoicing and praising God and thanking Him for His sovereign and mighty work in their lives. God is the one who gets all the credit for these radical changes in our lives.

This should be an encouragement to us as we pray for revival, to observe the ways that God is already at work among us. We should look around and see what God is doing in various ways and in various places, and we should thank God for the faith and the love that He is producing in people's lives. As you pray for the people in your small group, you should be looking for evidences of grace in their lives and thanking God for those things. God did that! And He is so good to do those things. When we see someone who is trusting God in the midst of a trial, that's evidence of God's grace for which we should thank God. When we see a brother or sister forgive someone who has hurt them deeply, that is something to rejoice over and thank God for. When we see one another demonstrating love for the saints, we should give thanks to God.

Also, as we hear about the things God is doing in other churches and other cities and other countries, it should bring us great joy to know that God is mighty and God is working to glorify His Name by producing faith and love in the lives of more and more people. This prompts me to confess something to you that I'm very ashamed of. In recent weeks as I've heard about some great things that God is doing in other churches, how He is using other preachers to advance His kingdom, my reaction was not mainly one of thankfulness, but rather of envy. And God, in His mercy, has shown me the wickedness of that sin and the subtle destructive power of that sin to divide rather than unite. When I hear how God is blessing other churches and using certain preachers in remarkable ways, it should not be a discouragement to me. It should not be an occasion for envy or jealousy. It should be an occasion for thanksgiving. God is at work. God is powerful! And we should give thanks to Him for what He is doing in other places. It should be an inspiring incentive for us to pray that God will show His power in more and more places and in greater ways.

Jonathan Edwards cited this as an encouragement to pray for revival. He wrote a letter, which turned out to be quite a long letter, to encourage the churches to pray for revival. And the title of it was, "An Humble Attempt to promote explicit agreement and visible union of God's people, in extraordinary prayer, for the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ's Kingdom on earth." And one of the things he mentions is this: "The late remarkable religious awakenings, in many parts of the Christian world, may justly encourage us in prayer for the promised glorious

and universal outpouring of the Spirit of God.” (*Works*, vol. 2, 294)

Let’s be thankful to God for the ways that He is pouring out His blessings in various churches and cities, how He is using various pastors and evangelists and missionaries, and let’s pray that these blessings will increase and spread to every people group on earth. So the first point is giving thanks to God.

Praying to See God

The second thing is praying to see God. In verses 17-18 Paul intercedes for the readers of his letter, making a request to God on their behalf. In verse 16 he says, “remembering you in my prayers,” and then verse 17 begins with a word indicating purpose. The purpose of his prayer, or the content of his prayer, is “*that* the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.” This is what Paul longs to see happen in their lives. And it is a God-centered request. Paul thanks God for their faith and love, and now he asks God to give them “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.” There is a continual recognition here that God is the one who acts and works and changes us, and God needs to give us understanding. We need him to reveal Himself to us.

There are five words in verses 17-18 that relate to the knowledge that Paul is praying for. First of all, in verse 17 he asks that God may give you a spirit of *wisdom* and of *revelation* in the *knowledge* of him. Then in verse 18, “having the eyes of your hearts *enlightened*, that you may *know* what is the hope to which he has called you.” Wisdom, revelation, knowledge, being enlightened, that you may know. This is Paul’s prayer, and we can sum it up as “praying to see God.”

It is similar to Moses’ prayer in Exodus 33, where God threatens to withdraw His presence from the Israelites because they’re a stiff-necked people. But Moses pleads with God to reveal Himself and not to withdraw His presence. He says, “Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please *show me* now your ways, that I may *know* you in order to find favor in your sight” (Ex 33:13). And then he says, “Please *show me* your glory” (v. 18). Moses wanted to see God. He wanted God to reveal Himself. And Moses knew that this is what he needed and what God’s people needed. They needed, and we need, to see God.

D. A. Carson, in his book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, in which he studies the prayers of Paul, says, “The one thing we most urgently need in Western Christendom is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better.” (pg. 15) There are many important causes, many devastating problems that need to be

addressed in our world and in the churches, but, as Carson says, “there is a sense in which these urgent needs are merely symptomatic of a far more serious lack.” We need to see God for who He is. We need to know Him better. That is what Moses was asking for. That is what Paul was asking for. This is what we should be crying to God for. This should be the essence of our prayer for revival.

Paul goes on in verses 18-19 to cite three purposes of this enlightenment, of this illumination, of this knowledge. First, in verse 18, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. Second, that you may know what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. And third, in verse 19, that you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. I want to focus on this third one, the immeasurable greatness of God’s power, and to do so I want to turn now to Paul’s prayer in chapter 3. From this prayer in chapter 1 we’ve seen the need to give thanks to God and to pray to see God. Now in the prayer of chapter 3 I want to highlight how Paul prays for power and also praises God for His power. All of these are aspects of how we can be praying for revival.

Praying for Power (Ephesians 3:14-21)

First of all, I want us to notice that in the context of verses 14-17 Paul mentions all three persons of the Trinity. In verse 14, the Father. In verse 16, his Spirit. And in verse 17, Christ. Now the word “Trinity,” itself, does not appear in the Bible. But the truth of God’s three-in-oneness is difficult to deny, even though many cults do deny it. But it was clear in Paul’s mind, who was an inspired apostle, it was clear in his mind that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, are distinct persons and yet united in the Godhead. Throughout this letter he refers to all three persons of the Trinity. And I just want to draw our attention to that because the doctrine of the Trinity is so fundamental to our faith and to our whole worldview. So the Trinitarian aspect of this prayer is that Paul is praying to the Father, asking that He would strengthen the believers with power through His Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in them.

Paul’s request here in verse 16 is for power. He is asking God to strengthen these believers with power. This strengthening will happen “through the Spirit” and “in your inner being,” meaning it is a spiritual power that Paul is asking for here. This is a prayer for spiritual empowerment. It is a plea for God to work in their inner being. Verse 17 continues, “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . .” These two things are intimately bound together. The Spirit strengthening and Christ indwelling, and these are profound miracles that can only happen according to

the riches of God's glory. The Spirit works in our inner being, and Christ dwells in our heart.

This is what it means to be a Christian, and it has to do with the inner being, it has to do with the heart. A person can make all kinds of external changes and adhere to a certain moral code and try to live a religious life. But if Christ is not dwelling in your heart through faith, it's all meaningless. Don't look to the external things. Look in your innermost being, in your heart of hearts. Is Christ dwelling there? Is He your only hope? Is He your treasure? Is He your righteousness? Christ dwelling in us through faith, that is the Good News. Even though I'm a wretched sinner who deserves God's punishment, Christ died to take my punishment upon Him, and therefore He can forgive me and actually live in my heart. This happens by faith, as Paul emphasized in chapter 2 and mentions again here.

Then he goes on in verse 17 to ask that, since as Christians you have been "rooted and grounded in love," [agricultural and architectural metaphor] you "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge . . ." Again he's asking for strength, for spiritual power. And what is it that we need strength for? To comprehend the love of Christ. The dimensions here (breadth, length, height, depth) are used to highlight how vast Christ's love is. And verse 19 states this even more clearly. The love of Christ "surpasses knowledge." So the prayer here is for the strength to comprehend and know Christ's love which is so big it surpasses knowledge.

The love of Christ is beyond anything that we can comprehend. It is so vast, so amazing, so powerful, so sacrificial, so glorious! Galatians 2:20 says, "And the life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved* me and *gave himself* for me." Christ's love is demonstrated in his sacrificial death. He gave himself for us. And we may think we know that. We may even take that for granted, thinking it's something we've heard over and over again since childhood. By God's grace, we may know something of the love of Christ, but we don't even come close to grasping the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love for us. In fact, we will spend eternity in heaven growing in our knowledge and understanding of Christ's love. It's infinite love. Christ is an infinite Being. And our finite minds will never fully grasp the dimensions of His love. His love will never fail. Those who are in Christ by faith will never be separated from His love. What a wonderful promise this is!

As Paul so gloriously concludes Romans 8, he asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or

sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This is Christ’s infinite and unfailing love for us.

It’s interesting to notice the way Paul words his prayer in Ephesians 3:19, “to *know* the *love* of Christ.” He doesn’t say, “to know facts about Christ.” Therefore, we can’t think of this knowing as a merely mental knowledge. This is an experiential knowledge. This is personally knowing and experiencing Christ’s love for us. Christ loves us with an infinite love, and we will never exhaust that love. He did what only He could do in that He came and became one of us so that He could live a righteous life on our behalf and die a sacrificial death on our behalf. And the purpose of all this is to bring us to Himself. The greatest gift He can give us is Himself, and this is the height of His love for us.

The clear implication of Paul’s prayer here is that we need the very power of God to comprehend something of the Christ’s love. His love surpasses knowledge, so it is a supernatural, miraculous work of God to illumine our hearts in such a way that we experience this infinite love that Christ has for us. And to be loved like this is to be changed. As we pray for God to give us power to know the love of Christ, we will be changed. The final purpose of the prayer, at the end of verse 19, is “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God,” which is a prayer for spiritual growth, spiritual maturity. The prayer is that we will be given power to have a deeper grasp of Christ’s love, and as a result that we will be radically changed and transformed, being filled with all the fullness of God.

This is an inspiring prayer for revival. This is a prayer we can pray for ourselves and for others around us and for all believers. Let’s pray for power—power to know Christ’s love and be changed by it.

Praising God for His Power

Lastly, we see that Paul not only prays for power, but then he concludes by praising God for His power. This is the last point I want to highlight. There was thanksgiving to God in chapter 1, and also prayer that we would see God. And here in chapter 3 we’ve seen a prayer for power, and now also a doxology that extols God’s power. Look at verses 20-21. “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the

church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

This is an exciting verse, and it’s an exciting verse as we think about praying for revival. Because revival is about the glory of God. It’s not about the glory of man. It’s not for the purpose of drawing attention to any particular church or preacher or ministry or missionary. It’s God’s power that brings the blessings of revival in a person’s life, in a church, in a community, and the purpose of these blessings is to highlight God’s abundant power and goodness. He is the giver of the gifts, and He gets the credit. Our role is to wait on Him, to trust in Him, to hope in Him. As Isaiah 64:4 says, “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.” We wait. God acts. We trust, and God saves. We pray, and God blesses. This is a beautiful thing, and it is all to God’s glory. We get the benefit, He gets the glory.

Ian Murray, in contrasting revival and revivalism, says that “the ethos of [revival] is that of concern and praise for the glory of God. The spirit of revival is the spirit of profound humility—churches and the wider communities around them find reason to ‘cease from man.’” (381) So in praying for revival this doxology should be the essence of what we are seeking. It should be our desire to praise our great God who is strong and mighty and gracious and generous to bestow blessings upon His people. It should be our desire, and our prayer, as the Lord taught us to pray, “Hallowed be your name.” We want God to glorify Himself.

Paul’s language in this doxology shows the limitations of our requests. We don’t even know how to ask for the things that will most glorify God. And so we acknowledge that He is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. The beauty of praying this way, praying for revival, praying for God to be glorified, is that we know it will happen. We don’t know exactly what it will look like for this church or this city, but we know that God is committed to glorifying His Name and blessing His people and taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Therefore as we pray according to His Word and according to His promises, we can have great assurance that our prayers will be answered. Edwards, in the “Humble Attempt to promote extraordinary prayer,” writes, “that which God abundantly makes the subject of his promises, God’s people should abundantly make the subject of their prayers. It also affords them the strongest assurances that their prayers shall be successful. With what confidence may we go before God, and pray for that, of which we have so many exceeding precious and glorious promises to plead!” (vol. 2, 291)

Let’s conform our will to God’s will and pray according to the things He is passionate about, the things He has promised to

do. And we praise Him as the One who can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.

This last point about praising God for His power should really become the ground and the purpose of all our prayers. We saw in the Lord's prayer how it begins with three petitions concerning God's glory. We see here that Paul's prayer culminates in a doxology. And this is a way for us to test our prayers. Is our desire for the glory of God, or something else? D. A. Carson asks, "Has God become so central to all our thought and pursuits, and thus to our praying, that we cannot easily imagine asking for anything without consciously longing that the answer bring glory to God?" (*A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 203)

In summary, then, let's pray for revival by giving thanks to God, by praying to see God, by praying for power, and by praising God for His power. May God, by His grace, pour out His Spirit upon us in greater and greater measure, and may He be glorified in reviving His people.