

Revival and Repentance

Ezra 10:1-12

So, what does a real revival look like? What does it look like when people turn to God in numbers large enough to make an obvious change in the culture? We modern Americans might be expected to ask such a question, as we have not seen such a thing since the time of the Civil War.

Now, that's not to say that the modern American Church hasn't experienced revivals on a smaller scale. Many of you remember when Rev. Billy Graham would travel all over the country, speaking in arenas – he even came to Jackson, Mississippi in June and July of 1952 and after hearing him there, 6,000 people, both black and white, made professions of faith in Christ.

The same sort of thing happened here in Port Gibson, although a generation earlier. The Rev. George Inge had conducted evangelistic meetings in Natchez and Hazlehurst in a tent that would seat about 2000 people. He came to preach in Port Gibson in the fall of 1891. As a result, we had 40 people become members of this congregation on November 1 of that year, joining just about the number of members we have today.

So, we might think that revival depends completely on the right preacher showing up and saying the right things. And from our study of the Book of Ezra, we can't deny that preaching God's Word is in fact an important component of revival. After all, it was Ezra's careful explanation of the Law of God that led people to realize their widespread sin problem at the beginning of chapter 9. Whenever God's Word is faithfully proclaimed, it should show that our lives aren't in complete conformity with God's Will.

But isn't it interesting – in chapter 9, we noticed that instead of pointing fingers, accusing all the wicked people who were breaking God's law, Ezra identified with them, confessing the sins of the whole community. And in chapter 10, we see him doing something else we might consider odd – weeping for the sins of God's people as if he were mourning the death of a loved one.

For that's what his actions at the beginning of chapter 9 mean – tearing clothes and pulling out one's hair was the ancient Hebrew way of expressing grief. And at the beginning of this chapter, we notice that a large number of other people joined him in this demonstration of grief, weeping because of their sins.

Now, we already saw last week that the particular sin these ancient people were confessing doesn't exactly apply to us modern-day Christians. And so, since it's no longer a problem for us to marry someone from a different ethnic group, we might be tempted to think that the grief of these ancient people would also be a bit out-of-place for us. After all, hasn't Jesus forgiven all our sins? So, if that's the case, why should we get so upset about them? Shouldn't Christians be more accustomed to joy than sorrow?

Well, let's think a moment about just how much it cost Jesus to forgive us: the pain, the shame, the humiliation of the cross. Surely that should give us cause for sober reflection, and perhaps even a few tears, such as those many of us shed when we saw Mel Gibson's 2004 movie, "The Passion of the Christ." But even then, our tears were probably shed more because of what happened to Jesus than they were for our sins, right? Do we still need to mourn our sins the way Ezra and his people did?

I think so, when we remember that the cross actually gives us a window into the heart of God. For you see, the cross wasn't just the righteous application of a judicial penalty, although it certainly was that. No the cross also shows us what our sin does to God. Our sin hurts Him and humiliates Him, like the pain and shame Jesus experienced on the cross. It grieves Him, like the grief a Father feels when He loses His Son.

And this makes sense when we understand sin in relational terms. For after all, sin isn't just a legal problem to be solved. It doesn't just offend God the way we offend the state when we break human laws. No, whenever we sin, we are saying something about our relationship with God. Simply put, the God Who obviously loves us enough to die for us takes our sin personally.

And I think we can understand this. We understand how much it hurts when someone we love turns away from us. We understand the humiliation that results from someone breaking a relationship into which we have poured our heart and soul. We know that heartache and grief are quite similar, that when someone we love walks out on us, it feels like someone has died.

Well, whenever we sin, how do you think God feels? For when we sin unknowingly, we are actually saying to God, "I don't care enough about what You think to learn what You want from me." And when we sin intentionally, we are saying to God, "I don't care what you think – I'm going to do what I want." When we give ourselves over to worry or fear, we are saying to God, "I don't think you care enough about me to take care of me," or perhaps, "I don't think you are powerful enough to solve my problems." And when we put other people, other things ahead of God in our lives, when we spend more time and attention on the things of this world than we do on Him, we are saying to God, "I don't care how much you love me, I just want Your things – I'm not really that interested in You."

Oh, yes, we know how we would feel if someone we love said these sorts of things to us. And God is no different – because God loves us so much, whenever we break God's law, we also break His heart. So, having seen the cross – having seen the love of God and the heartbreak of God – shouldn't we Christians mourn our sins, and grieve our sins even more than those Old Testament people did?

Okay, so, given that we are the guilty party, given that our sin has hurt God, Someone Who loves us so much, what should we do about it? Well, how would we restore any other relationship, once we realize that we have done something that deeply hurts someone we love?

We know what to do, and that's the same thing the people around Ezra did. We know we need to start by confessing what we've done. We know we need to admit that we are at fault. For confession goes a step beyond just realizing that we have sinned – that, after all, is what happened to the people of God in chapter 9. No, confession goes further. It moves from an inner understanding to an outward admission of guilt.

And the person to whom we confess must be the same person that we have hurt, isn't it? That means whenever we sin, we need to confess, to admit what we've done to God. We need to pray the sort of prayer that David prayed in our responsive reading. Instead of keeping silent, holding the secret of our sin inside ourselves, we need to acknowledge our sin, our iniquity to God. And because of the love and the justice God has displayed so clearly in the cross of Christ, we can be sure that if we do this, God will forgive us.

And I hope we can see that this is the point at which revival ceases to be the work of the preacher and becomes something we must all do. Oh, the Billy Grahams of this world can explain the truth of God's Word, and show us how far short our lives come from meeting God's expectations of us. The best preachers can describe God's love for us and plead with us to return that love. And, like Ezra, they can even model for us what it means to confess our sin. But they can't confess our sins for us. They can't own up to our mistakes for us. And so if we would see revival spread throughout our culture, perhaps this sort of confession is something we modern American Christians need to do, and do more fervently, and do more tearfully.

But even this isn't all that true revival involves, and it's not all we see in Ezra chapters 9 and 10. For if revival begins with an honest encounter with God's Word, and if such an encounter helps us see that our lives are not being lived in accordance with God's will, and if this realization of our sin breaks our hearts even as it breaks God's heart, and if our conviction and our sorrow move us to confess our sin to God, there's still one more step that must be taken, one more action that moves revival out of the realm of the hypothetical and into reality. And that is the step of repentance.

Repentance? But isn't that the same thing that we've already discussed? Doesn't repentance mean conviction of sin, sorrow for sin, and confession of sin? Yes, but repentance goes a step farther, for all these things can be present without any outward or lasting change taking place in our lives. For example, I know a man living on the streets of Port Gibson who once confessed to me that he abuses street drugs. In his saner moments, he knows he has a problem and admits he has a problem but he isn't yet willing to do what it takes to stop using drugs. He isn't yet willing to make a fundamental change in his life.

For that's what repentance really means – making good on the determination to change one's course of life. For to truly repent, you must not only realize you are going in the wrong direction. You must not only be sorry you have been going in the wrong direction. You must not only confess that you have been going in the wrong direction. You must turn around. You must stop going in the wrong direction and start going in the right direction. You must make a change.

And isn't it interesting – in chapter 10, the desire for repentance comes not from Ezra, but from the people. Yes, Ezra summarizes what the people have done and the change they need to make in verses 10 and 11. But that only happens after Shechaniah, one of the leaders of the people, admits they have done wrong and that they need to make a covenant to do right in the future. In fact, in verse 4, Shechaniah has to urge Ezra to put the wheels of justice in motion, a process we'll examine in more detail next week. In other words, the people bought in to the reforms they needed to make even before those changes could take place. They weren't forced to repent – they embraced the need for repentance for themselves.

And so we see that if revival begins with preachers providing a clear exposition of God's Word, and if preachers can set an example as to how people should feel about sin, and if preachers can help people understand why they need to confess their sins, and even join their people in confessing sin, it is only those who have committed sin that can initiate repentance, that can own up to what they've done and actually make a change in their lives. In short, if revival begins in the pulpit, it must move to the pews, if it is to have any real impact.

Could such a thing happen in our culture? Sure, and we do need to pray to that end. We do need to pray that God would pour out His Holy Spirit on those who don't yet know Him, on those who need to place their faith in Him for the first time. We do need to pray that others come to conviction of their sin, and confess their sins, and turn away from their sins.

But let's face it – while we can pray for others to repent, the only sort of repentance we can do anything about is our own. So, while we pray for God's grace to be poured out on others, let's pray the same prayer for ourselves. Let's ask God to reveal more of His will to us. And let's ask Him for the grace, not just to understand and confess our sin, but to turn away from it, to live more and more consistently according to His will.