

American Vine

by Richard Owen Roberts

This sermon emphasizes the need for repentance and revival, highlighting the failure of human efforts and the importance of turning back to God. It discusses the consequences of prayer that offends God, the history of God's work in the nation, and the urgency of preparing for God's intervention. The central theme revolves around the prayer for God to turn His face back to His people and bring about salvation and revival.

Scripture: Psalms 80:3, Exodus 32:9, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Hebrews 11:1, Isaiah 55:6, Acts 3:19, James 4:8, Revelation 2:5, Matthew 3:8, Joel 2:12

Topics: "Repentance", "Divine Intervention"

Description

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Transcript

We were asked earlier this afternoon, what are the prospects of the Congress calling the nation to a solemn assembly? Now, that almost sounded absurd. And perhaps most of you don't know that only a relatively short time ago, there was a very serious move in Congress toward that very goal. In fact, I was asked if I would go to Washington and speak to both the Senate and the House at a solemn assembly they were seeking to call.

But they failed, because one very dominant man, with a hatred of everything true and godly, was able to squelch that. So that we don't really have any hope in the Congress or the Senate. But do you have any hope in yourself? Now, my word, I've been preaching for more than 65 years.

And I've never yet succeeded in bringing a revival to pass. I surely have no hope in myself. I look at the other speakers, men whom I respect and honor and admire.

But I don't have any hope in them either. I don't have any hope in the church. But I remember well the words of the psalmist, turn us again, oh God, and cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved.

The hope was never in us. It is crystal clear that God calls upon us to repent. And when we can, we must.

But when we can't, it's still not too late. Because God can do what we cannot. Oh, we believe that, of course.

But I doubt that we believe it to the level that we ought. Now, naturally, in preparation for this conference, I've given substantial time and attention to what I ought to speak upon. And I have been asking regularly the question, what passage of scripture that really deals with the issues can I call to your attention at this hour? Only one seems suitable.

But I said, Lord, I can't use that. Because I already did on another occasion. In fact, I've got some proof before me that I actually did.

Listen to this. A revival cry, Psalm 80. Why is thine ear not listening now? Why is thy glory gone? Why is thy power scarcely seen? Why is thy face withdrawn? Why art thou angry with our prayers? Why are we filled with tears? Why do our foes contend and laugh? Why, Lord, these many years thou, in thy grace, hast planted us, nurtured us by thy care, prospered our lives with wondrous grace, sowed bounteous seed to bear.

I'll not read the rest of this fine poem. But at the bottom, it reads, Bill Ellis, April 29, 1993. After hearing Richard R. Roberts preach on this text.

Well, some of you weren't there. So perhaps you can be hopeful. But Bill is sitting here.

We are reluctant, aren't we, to repeat ourselves. We try desperately not to. Our minds aren't all that sharp, really.

And people who hear us tell us from time to time, I heard you say that before. But we haven't seen the revival yet that we need. And so what's wrong with going back to a passage we've looked at before and look at it again with the great hope? Turn us again.

Oh, God, cause thy face to shine. And we shall be saved. Let's go directly to Psalm 80.

Let me read it in its entirety. As we're turning to it, may I simply state we'll divide the psalm into four parts. Verses 1 to 3, the opening petition.

Verses 4 to 7, the heartfelt lament. Verses 14 to 19, the heart of the prayer unveiled. And I left out verses 8 to 13, the contrast between the way it was and the way it is.

So verse 1, oh, give ear, shepherd of Israel, thou who dost lead Joseph like a flock, thou who art enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up thy power and come to save us. Oh, God, restore us and cause thy face to shine upon us. And we will be saved.

Oh, Lord God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry with the prayer of thy people? Thou hast fed them with the bread of tears, and thou hast made them to drink tears in large measure. Thou dost make us an object of contention to our neighbors and our enemies' laugh among themselves. Oh, God of hosts, restore us and cause thy face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

Thou didst remove a vine from Egypt. Thou didst drive out the nations and its planted. Thou didst clear the ground before it.

And it took deep root, and it filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shadow, and the cedars of God with its boughs. It was sending out its branches to the sea, and it shoots to the river.

Why, hast thou broken down its hedges so that all who pass that way pick its fruit? A boar from the forest eats it away, and whatever moves in the field feeds on it. Oh, God of hosts, turn again now. We beseech thee, look down from heaven and see and take care of this vine, even the shoot which thy right hand has planted, and on the sun whom thou hast strengthened for thyself.

It is burned with fire. It is cut down. They perish at the rebuke of thy countenance.

Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou didst make strong for thyself. Then we shall not turn back from thee. Revive us, and we will call upon thy name.

Oh, Lord, God of hosts, restore us. Cause thy face to shine upon us, and we will, he said. None of us, when we're in our right minds, think that we can revive ourselves, but in careful, sober, biblical thinking, we face the necessity of doing what we can.

Therefore, the exhortations we have been considering already this afternoon drawn out of 2 Chronicles 7. But is it not glorious to realize that when we've gone so deeply into sin as a nation, it's still not too late? We might just as well go home now as to spend the rest of this brief conference period together if it's up to us. But thank God it isn't up to us. Listen, I've been thinking, suppose God himself was willing to add another chapter to Holy Scripture, a chapter written this morning for today.

Could he come any closer to the heart of the issues than we have right here in front of us in Psalm 80? Is not everything we need to consider on this subject a revival in front of us in this passage? It's incredible, really, when you consider how absolutely relevant the Word of God is to every time and every circumstance. Now, notice how this particular psalm begins. O give ear, shepherd of Israel, thou who dost lead Joseph like a flock.

When would one ask God to listen? Well, clearly, at the time when there's reason to think he is not doing so. Now, have you ever asked, why is the prayer meeting vanishing from the church? And in those few places where some remnants of prayer remain, why is it that the bulk of those prayers are focused on passing matters, temporal, earthly things that really have nothing to do with the reign of Christ and the advancement of the kingdom of God? Well, when God's not asking, or when we're asking and God's not listening, then our prayers degenerate to the point where they become what might be called cheap prayers. You gather together as a church in a prayer meeting and you ask God to do something he's already done in creation itself.

Oh, please pray for Mary Jones. She fell and broke her arm. Well, before the creation, God intended to make the human body that could heal itself.

We haven't accomplished anything of major consequence when we pray for these physical things. No, obviously, God intended we should pray for those things that are real. Not the shadowy things, but the things of substance.

Most of us have faced the reality of Hebrews 11, verse 1. Faith gives substance to things that are hoped for. It provides the evidence of things not seen. We know that the nature of faith is it enables a person to focus upon the unseen and the eternal.

So when Christians come together, that's where the focus ought to be. But when God's not listening to our prayers, then we ask for those cheap, those simple, those inconsequential things that are going to more or less automatically be answered. Now, have you faced the reality that we are living at a time when God is by and large not listening? If one were to arrange a list of reasons why revival is so desperately needed, that would surely be one of the reasons.

So give ear, shepherd of Israel, thou who dost lead Joseph like a flock. Do you have the impression the church is being led like a flock? All these wild innovations that have appeared over the last several years don't in any way indicate any knowledge of God whatsoever, let alone divine leadership. Because God isn't leading us, we've invented ways to lead ourselves that make it look as if he is.

We've created lousy substitutes for the reality of a God who is with us, going before us, leading us like a flock. But look at what he adds to that statement. Notice now these words, before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up thy power and come to save us.

Oh, but you said you left out something of incredible consequence. Well, yes, I did, didn't I? Thou who art enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth. Now again, when would you ask God to shine forth? Would it not be at the time when he was not doing so? But consider the very language here.

Thou who art enthroned above the cherubim, you remember perfectly well that in those days when indeed God was in that tabernacle in the wilderness and then in the temple itself, once a year the great high priest was to go into the Holy of Holies to make sacrifice both for his sins and the sins of the people. And we understand it was a dangerous thing to do because he might, when in that holy place where the presence of God shines so greatly, no man could endure it. They first put in a smudge pot in order to obscure the presence of God.

And then before that high priest entered to fulfill his duties. You remember perfectly well, don't you? I have to hold on because I never know when I'm about to fall over. But they put a cord around his ankle so that if he offended God and was struck down, they didn't have to go in to pull his body out, but they could draw his dead body out by a cord.

Thou who art enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth. The psalm is written at the time like this. When God is turning a deaf ear to the prayer of his people.

When God is withholding his glory from his people's midst. The psalm is written at the time like this. When God is turning a deaf ear to the prayer of his people.

When God is withholding his glory from his people's midst. But in verse 2, stir up thy strength and come and save us. You would have to be literally out of your mind to think that God is doing his best for the American church.

Indeed, what it looks like is God says to the American church, you're not willing to do things my way. Therefore, I'll let you do them your way and see how you like it. And we're very clever.

We're immensely resourceful. We have been able to deceive the bulk of the people into thinking God is with us. And if we keep announcing he is, we don't have to have any evidence of it.

They'll just believe us because we're such good men. But when the church is as foul as the world, when the prayer meeting is all but gone, when the true radical transformation of the law is close to nonexistent,

we have reason to think that God is not stirring up his strength and coming to save. And some of us are old enough.

And we're ministering at a time when God was stirring up his strength and coming to save. If you'll pardon an old man's honest confession, as a boy who had never studied theology, had read only portions of the Bible, but was clearly called of God, I stood in front of congregations and preached, and I saw more divine happenings then as a child than I see now. And it's not because I've become unfaithful or I've neglected to speak upon the urgent issues of Scripture.

The simple truth is God is not stirring up his strength and coming to save us. So we've got those radical issues we've got to look at. God's inattention to our prayers.

God's unwillingness to lead us as a flock. God's withholding that glorious shining presence that is so marvelous in its impact upon the lost. God not exercising his strength to come and to save.

And thus the prayer of verse 3, which as you well know, is repeated in verse 7, word for word, and then again in verse 19 as well, but also referred to specifically in verse 14. Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved. When some of the modern translations use the expression, restore us, that's what's meant, to turn us.

The reason we need restoration is because we have turned from God, and God has turned from us. But what a blessed thing to realize when we have sinned beyond the hope of personal repentance, when we cannot find our way to turn again to God, we can cry out, O God, I've gone too far, I've made it impossible to turn back, but you can still turn me. And he can, and he will.

And every great revival of history has come because God has heard that radical cry, turn us again, O God. But then as I said, there's a heartfelt lamentation starting in verse 4. O Lord, God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry with the prayer of thy people? Now perhaps some of you have for the very first time to face the reality that prayer can and does offend God. You say, all prayer? Oh, no, not all prayer, but some prayer.

Well, you say, I'm wondering, what kind of prayer do you think it is that would so greatly offend God that he would not listen? Indeed, that he would go beyond not listening, that he would send tears to drink in great measure. Well now, just consider where we're at as a nation. We are clearly a nation under righteous judgment from God.

What if the prayer of the church is that God will reverse the judgment? Is that a prayer that would please God or a prayer that would anger God? If God places us under righteous judgment because we have sinned and have not repented and we ask him to lift the judgment but do not repent, our prayer will be an offense to him. Now, I want to speak sympathetically, but many of us are facing issues like this. In our congregation, there are parents who have a son who is dying of AIDS and they're rightly burdened and concerned and they're asking the congregation to pray that their son will not die of AIDS.

Would you be willing to join in a prayer of that sort? Or take one of these natural disasters as we describe them that are becoming increasingly frequent. A German insurance company of which I read recently has been keeping track of natural disasters for well over 100 years and they have made it clear that there is a huge multiplication of natural disasters in recent years. Ought we to pray that God will cease sending these natural disasters? In short, is it right to ask God to lift the judgment before we have dealt with the

sin? Seems like a very obvious issue.

If God sends a judgment, most of us have learned that his judgments are not unrighteous. That's why we depict them as righteous judgments and some of us have learned from the study of Scripture that the judgments of God fall into two general categories. Those that we sometimes describe as remedial and those that we otherwise describe as final.

Now, knowing that some of you haven't thought your way biblically through this issue, I must take a moment to help you. God is in no hurry to kill and destroy. God is full of loving kindness.

He is indeed a God of incredible mercy. He would much prefer to send a judgment that led to repentance instead of a judgment that led directly to hell. So we describe these generous, these kind, these gracious judgments of God as remedial.

And that, of course, is a term not everybody's using, but most of us have heard the term and perhaps have at least a measure of understanding. When we have in school a remedial reading class, we understand that it's a catch-up kind of a class. Perhaps one of your children was very slow in learning to read and they were placed in a remedial reading class so that they might catch up with the rest of their class.

God graciously sends remedial judgments to help us to catch up, to be where we're supposed to be instead of the worthless vassals we have become because of the clutter of sin in our life. Now if God sends a gracious remedial judgment to correct us of error in which we live and then we ask him to lift the judgment without correcting the error, are we not obviously praying distinctly against his will and his purpose? And ought we to be surprised when he's angry with our prayer? But much of the church has still to face the reality that prayer can and does anger God. And I would simply urge you, don't live in the realm of imagination, live in the realm of reality.

God delights in the prayer of the righteous man but he despises the prayer of those that are seeking shortcuts and avoiding responsibilities of holiness. So a remedial judgment intended by God as gracious to turn us back to himself is not to be prayed against but to be heeded. But most of us who have dealt with this at all are aware of the fact that a remedial judgment left unheeded will become in God's time a final judgment.

And the final judgment is a judgment where there's neither time nor opportunity for repentance. And God has given us some classic examples of this in Holy Scripture. One has only to mention Ananias and Sapphira to immediately recognize that's what happened.

Peter didn't say first to one and then the other. If you'll go out through that door you'll discover on the right a prayer room. Make your way to the prayer room and see if you can't find some cause of repentance.

No, he confirmed the lie that they told by their own words and God struck them dead. Now friends, there's an immense consequence in what I've just said. We are not living in the final judgment.

If we were, we wouldn't be here. We're living under the remedial judgment of God. Not just us individually but our nation.

Therefore, there is incredible hope. Oh sure, things are bad and growing worse very rapidly. But God can turn us again and can cause his face to shine.

And we can truly be saved. It's not too late. But notice what is added now to this matter of sending tears to drink in great measure.

These are very sobering words, that is certain. Oh Lord God of host, how long will thou be angry with the prayers of thy people? Thou has made them or fed them with the bread of tears. Thou has made them drink tears in large measure.

Now look, let's not be silly. This is not the matter of the world. This is a matter of the people of God.

Now let me put to you a very distinct question. You know what the expression extended family means? Do you have any cause of tears in your extended family? I don't know a single family that does not have tears to drink in great measure in extended family. My dear wife has two brothers, both of whom claim they were converted as youth, who have lived all their lives as ungodly men.

Brilliant, successful, and ungodly. On my side of the family, divorce, abortion, remarriage, addiction, and only yesterday, our only granddaughter gave birth to an illegitimate child, raised in a godly home, prayed over day after day. The Lord is giving tears to drink in large measure.

To blame the devil is nonsense. It's got to be realistic. When God is grieved with his wayward and his indifferent people, he loves them enough to send remedial judgment, the withdrawal of his manifest presence, the bread of tears to eat, tears to drink in large measure.

But notice now how this psalm continues. Verse 6. Thou dost make us an object of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves. It doesn't seem all that long ago to me.

When I went into an automobile dealership to speak to the owner about his soul, his wife appeared to have been truly converted, and he was showing some warmth toward me. And I went there to speak to him about Christ, but there was nobody in the office or the display area. I opened the door to the shop, and all the mechanics were off in a corner with their heads down, laughing.

I deliberately slammed the door. One of them glanced up, and I heard him say, Oh, oh, the preacher has come. Immediately, those men stood upright and said, Preacher, we apologize.

We didn't mean for you to hear that. I didn't hear anything except the preacher has come. But I knew perfectly well what was going on.

There was a blush. There was an awareness of right and wrong. Everybody I can remember meeting in all the years of my ministry knew the difference between right and wrong.

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But now pastors often don't seem to have any idea of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. We have been made by God himself the laughingstock of the world. We love to blame somebody else for our own problem.

But the simple truth is God has judged us righteously by causing our enemies to laugh at us. Now just think of the reality of this. Moses, in that incredible experience recorded in Exodus 32 and 33, when he was arguing with God and making it clear to God, If you don't go with us, we're not going anywhere, said to God, If you're not with us, how can the people of the world believe? Now somehow that hasn't gripped us.

We think we can witness to a lost and dying world effectively when there is no evidence of the presence of God in our midst. And that's one of the many things we need to repent of. Our stupidity in thinking we can multiply our evangelistic labors and be successful when there's no true evidence God is with us.

That which arrests the world and turns multitude to righteousness is the presence of God in the midst of his people so that every personal witness is made powerful by the presence of God in the person who is bearing witness. So we have become the laughingstock, a subject of contention among those who know us. And they are amused by our stupidity and they delight in our increasing failure.

Verse 4, or 8, excuse me. Thou didst remove the vine from Egypt. Thou didst drive out the nations and didst plant it.

Thou didst clear the ground before it and it took deep root and it tilled the land. The mountains were covered with its shadows and the cedars of God with its fowls. You may recall that I gave in advance the outline and I said part three, the contrast between the way it was and the way it is.

Now think of this. We're not in Israel. Obviously I expect most of us are not even Jews.

We're dealing now with the subject of the vine. We're told plainly God went down into Egypt and he dug up a vine and he transported that vine from Egypt to the land of promise, Canaan itself, where he planted it, where it sent down deep roots and where its branches spread until the whole of the region had the vine in it. But that's not foreign language.

To those of us who know something of American history, in 1861, a time that was referred to earlier of the Civil War, when the Congress adjourned and they went together to Christ Church to seek the face of God, a pastor by the name of Benjamin Dorr preached a sermon on that occasion that was entitled The American Vine. Using this very passage of scripture, he demonstrated that we parallel Israel in many, many consequential ways. As Israel was in bondage in Egypt, so our forefathers were in bondage in that old country under the reign of a king who thought himself superior to God Almighty.

They sought relief, and in prayer they discovered a vision to move to North America and plant a colony that would be indeed the new Israel. And they declared themselves in writing, this is the new Israel in covenant relationship with God. And therefore year after year, in the solemn assembly sermons, in the fast

day sermons, in the Thanksgiving Day sermons, the godly men who led the churches of our nation repeatedly reminded the nation that we were the American vine.

And indeed, the parallel is obvious. A little colony there in Massachusetts Bay sending down its roots into the depth of the soil where the water existed began to flourish. And soon that vine spread across the land and for a very long time that vine had the hedge of God's protection about it.

We became great, not because of our natural resources, not because of our human ability, but because the grace of God was upon us. And we were alert to the fact that we were one nation under God. Then the day came for Israel when God himself broke down that hedge.

That's what we read here in Psalm 80. The wild boars of the fields broke in and devoured the vine. Before the pigs had finished, the strangers, the hostile people, came and plucked the grapes.

And when the psalmist writes, there is now a land stripped of its glory, a land that is no longer productive of true good because it forsook God and God forsook them. And so the prayer, turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine and we shall be saved. Has not the time come for us to stop the foolishness and return to the reality that our only hope has always been the same as it is right now, that God himself will do what we cannot.

Notice now verse 11. Sending out its branches to the sea, it shoots to the river, and as I quoted a moment ago, why? Hostile, broken down its hedges so that all that pass that way pick its fruit to bore from the forest, eats it away, and whoever moves in the field feeds upon it. O God of hosts, turn again now, we beseech thee.

Look down from heaven and see and take care of this vine. If we make that our cry, will God turn a deaf ear? Now I'm going to be ever so blunt and tell you what I believe with all my heart. Everybody here who's praying for revival was prompted by the Spirit of God to do so.

And across this nation, there are millions praying for revival. Now God did not prompt us to pray so he could taunt us, turn his back and say, I never intended to do anything, I just wanted to know what you would do. I don't believe that for a moment.

I believe with all my heart, God has stood us up and has done so because he wants to come again in great power and transform this nation. But we're taught now, in this passage, matters of great consequence concerning this type of prayer. Look at what is described here, verses 15 and the following.

We're asking God to return, to look down from heaven, to behold and visit this time, verse 14. And God is asked to remember the branch that he made strong for himself. It is reported in verse 16 that the vineyard is burned with fire.

It's cut down, it withers at the look of God's displeasure. Oh, get a hold of that! Nothing is wrong with America that is not first wrong in the church. And when God turned his back upon the church, he turned his back upon the nation.

And when God hears the cry, the desperate, heartfelt cry, Oh, turn us again! Oh, God! We will see true revival, for true revival is expressed in this prayer. True revival is the church being turned back to God and God himself being turned back to the church. Nobody has ever defined revival more explicitly than when it was said, Revival is God in the midst of his people.

Now we come to the urgent issue. First, do you personally really believe that God can do it again? Now, I've discovered in my own life that there can be a huge gap between believing what God can do and believing what he will do. So we need to face the question.

You've already said, I believe he can. Do you really believe he will? Is not the nature of true prayer confidence that God will do the very thing we're asking for? Is it not a sham to ask God for something when you are doubtful that indeed he will? So let us be honest with ourselves. Do you believe that God will turn America back to himself? Do you really believe that? Well now listen, when a new child is expected in a home, do they just go around saying we're expecting a new child? My impression is, I know this happened in our home.

It happened in our son's home where they were expecting this illegitimate child. The girl we believe came to true repentance, expressed publicly before her church her grief and sorrow at having violated the law. The whole church has been making ready for the event that happened yesterday.

Our son said we'd love for you to come and stay but honestly our place is a mess because we've been getting ready for a new baby. Were we offended? No! Delighted! Now what's the sense of saying turn us again oh God and cause thy face to shine and we shall be saved if you're not making preparations for salvation. Many of us have learned that revival is a very fragile blessing.

If it's true what I just said that revival is Christ in the midst of his people then it's necessary to make preparation to see that all eyes remain on Christ. Every revival in history that's been broken has been broken by eyes being turned from Christ to something of an indifferent nature. If we believe, why aren't we ready? Why haven't we prepared? Why aren't we living in expectation? No we've used the word hope as if we don't know that it's going to happen we're afraid maybe it won't but we hope it will.

Now if that's the way you feel about heaven well one can't help wonder whether you're a Christian at all. Is not our glorious hope a confidence that indeed we will spend eternity with our dear and blessed Savior? So when we pray turn us again O God and cause thy face to shine then we ought to get ready for being saturated with the presence of God. We have to learn how to keep the focus on Christ.

And we ought to learn how to turn aside everything that will violate that glorious principle of all eyes on Jesus. Now the prayer itself being repeated three times and then referred to a fourth time in verse 14 is obviously a prayer of true entreaty. One cannot deny that this is indeed the kind of a prayer that God longs for.

But it is more than that. It's a prayer of absolutely wonderful simplicity. It's simply saying to God I can't, you can and I'm expecting you to do it.

The opportunity is clear. It's clearly a prayer within the will of God. It's certainly a prayer of deepening significance.

People often ask me how long have you been doing this? And I report as accurately as I can and they say don't you get discouraged. I wasn't appointed by God to bring revival to pass but simply to report what I know to be true. I know God can.

I believe he will. I'm making ready.

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