

What Is Revival?

by Richard Owen Roberts

Richard Owen Roberts emphasizes the necessity of spiritual thirst and humility as prerequisites for experiencing true revival in the church.

Duration: 54:45

Scripture: 1 Kings 8:35

Topics: "Revival", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the importance of revival and the consequences of failing to worship and serve God faithfully. He references Leviticus 26, which describes the blessings that come from obeying God's commandments. The preacher then reads from Isaiah 44, where God promises to pour out his spirit and blessings on those who are thirsty for him. However, he warns that turning away from God and worshiping other gods will result in God's anger and the withholding of blessings. The preacher emphasizes the need for revival and the power of God's word to bring about lasting conversions.

Transcript

I'm grateful for the opportunity to be here again at the seventh HeartCry for Revival conference. Last year it was my great joy to speak on the incredibly important aspect of revival, the manifest presence of Christ in the midst of his people. There are two really immensely consequential matters in this great subject of revival.

On the one hand, God drawing near and manifesting himself. And on the other hand, the incredible flow of the word of God like a mighty flood. Now the Apostle Paul in a prayer request found in the last chapter of 2 Thessalonians focused on this issue of the word as a flood.

You might want to familiarize yourself with these verses in this connection. So 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. Finally brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified just as it did also with you. Now it may come as a surprise to some, but Paul was living at the time he wrote these words in a circumstance that was different from what he had formerly experienced.

Many of the places where he had been, the word had moved forward with incredible power and indeed covered the area like a mighty flood. But he's now living at a time when the forward movement of the word is grievously hampered. And many older preachers like myself can testify to the same thing.

When I was but a boy preaching all over the land, we saw incredible stirrings of the Holy Spirit. Now we see very small movements in comparison by and large. Once in a while something more vital and enduring.

So I say again, two of the great aspects of revival are God's nearness and the free flow of his word. And it's perfectly marvelous to realize that in a season of revival, the word rushes forth with incredible power and covers broad areas and people come flocking into the kingdom of God. It's not uncommon for more persons to be profoundly and lastingly converted in six months of gracious revival than for 16 years of constant faithful preaching of the word of God.

Now there are not all that many people in the land that really believe in revival or care anything about it. We had a bit of a stirring a while ago at Wheaton College and afterward some were writing in the school publication that the last thing we need is another one of those revivals of religion. Well, if I thought the revival was what some people think it is, I'd join those who say that's the last thing we need.

We've had plenty of excitement, plenty of noise, plenty of enthusiasm. Not all that much, by the way, but plenty. But of the manifest presence of Christ, we've not had nearly enough.

And of the powerful forward flow of the word of God, it has been scarce indeed. So our text this afternoon is a text that speaks to this particular issue, an Old Testament text, please, found in the prophecy of Isaiah at chapter 44. Isaiah 44.

Let me read just a brief portion, commencing with verse 1. But now listen. O Jacob, my servant, and Israel whom I have chosen, thus says the Lord who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you. Do not fear, O Jacob, my servant, and you, Jerusalem, whom I have chosen.

For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground. I will pour out my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. They shall spring up among the grass like poplars by the stream of water.

The one will say, I am the Lord, and the other will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, belonging to the Lord, and the name, Israel's name, with honor. I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods upon the dry land. We're not experiencing very much of God's outpouring of water, and is not the explanation more than obvious? We're not thirsty.

God doesn't break his word. He doesn't give promises and then betray his people by violating what he has said. I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on dry land.

Now, this text goes in two directions. It goes in the backward direction of those incredibly consequential passages out of Old Testament Scripture that describe the situation when God's people fail him, when they betray him, when they worship and serve gods of their own manufacture, instead of the God who reveals himself in Scripture. Passages like Leviticus 26.

Listen to these words from verses 3 to 5. If you walk in my statutes, and you keep my commandments so as to carry them out, then I will give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce, and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. Indeed, your threshing will last for you until the grape gathering, and the grape gathering will last until the sowing time. You will thus eat of your food to the full, and live securely in your land.

But that's just one of an abundance of passages. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy chapter 11, verses 10 to 17. For the land into which you are entering to possess it is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you used to sow your seed and water it with your foot like a vegetable garden.

Did you ever notice that? Water it with your foot. Now what's that mean? Well, they had these pumps that they worked with their foot, and it was a hard job getting a crop that was worthy of the labor. And the Lord says it's not going to be like that into the land in which I'm bringing you, but the land into which you're about to cross to possess it, a land of hills and valleys, drinks water from the rains of heaven.

It's a land for which the Lord your God cares. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it from the beginning even to the end of the year. And it shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I'm commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul, then I will give you rain for the land in its seasons, dearly rain and the late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine, and you shall eat and be satisfied.

But beware, lest your hearts be deceived and you turn away and serve other gods and worship them, for the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens and there will be no rain for the ground. And it will not yield its fruit, and you will perish quickly from the good land which the Lord your God is giving you. Now Solomon picked up this same significant issue and he voiced it in his prayer that preceded the dedication of the temple.

For instance, 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 35 and 36, When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain, because they have sinned against thee, and they pray toward this place, and confess thy name, and turn from their sin, when thou dost afflict them, then hear thou in heaven and forgive the sin of thy servants and thy people Israel. Indeed, teach them the good way in which they should walk and send rain on the land which thou hast given to thy people for an inheritance. Many of us are acquainted with that passage, and of course that's a parallel passage to 2 Chronicles chapter 6, where very much the same words are recorded.

And then most of us know by heart God's reply in 2 Chronicles chapter 7 verses 13 and 14. If I shut up the heavens so there is no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people, and my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves. But there's no use going on prayer from the arrogant, from the proud in heart, is an insult to the Almighty.

Every fresh work of grace begins with the people of God humbling themselves. And as we look around us and we see how dry and how parched our land is in the things that really matter, you would suppose that the whole of the church would be on its face, weeping, fasting, praying, and calling upon God. But thus far, nothing has occurred that we can't handle.

Every fresh affliction that has come upon us, we've been able to boast afterward, well, we took care of that one. And we often wonder, what is the Lord going to have to do before we are sufficiently thirsty to humble ourselves, and pray, and seek his face, and turn from our wicked ways, so that he can indeed hear from heaven, and forgive our sin, and heal our land. But the same basic theme is echoed in a powerful and a very positive way in the book of Joel, when the prophet cries out, do not fear, O land.

Chapter two, verses 21 to 26. Do not fear, O land. Rejoice and be glad, for the Lord has done great things.

Now, we mustn't forget what precedes these words. A plague of locusts that comes in four different waves, and in incredible draught, so that indeed, first manifestations of worry and concern are seen in the cattle of the field, who wander about in a hopeless state, for there's not a blade of grass to eat, or a drop of water to drink. Do not fear, beast of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness have turned green, for the tree has borne its fruit.

The fig tree and the vine have yielded in full. So rejoice, O sons of Israel, and be glad in the Lord your God, for he has given you the early rains for your vindication, and he has poured down on you the rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. And the threshing floors will be full of grain, and the vats will overflow with the new wine, and with oil.

Then I will make up for you the years, oh how I love this one, then I will make up for you the years that the locust have eaten, the creeping locust, the stripping locust, the gnawing locust. My great army, which I sent among you, and you shall have plenty to eat and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. Then my people will never be put to shame.

Thus you will know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and there is no other, and my people will never be put to shame. Well, that's the backward direction, where this promise of water upon the thirsty, of floods upon the dry land, is principally focused upon earthly soil, crops, drought, hunger, thirst, as a result of sin. But the passage itself, as I said, goes in two directions.

It goes in the direction of the more consequential. No, I don't mean to say that the drought, a time in which there's nothing to eat, and nothing to drink, a time that creates such bitterness that the cattle of the field wander in absolute confusion. No, that is consequential, but the consequence of that can hardly be compared with the consequence of a time when the word of God comes without power, without meaning, without influence, when multitudes who hear it really give no serious attention to it, when the times grow steadily worse and worse, no matter what preaching of the gospel there is.

Look, if you will, back at Isaiah 44, and observe that, indeed, this very matter is brought to the fore. They will spring up among the grass like poplars by streams of water. The one will say, I am the Lord, and that one will call upon the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, belonging to the law, and will name Israel's name with honor.

Clearly, there is another dimension to that besides rain from heaven that waters a very dry earth. It enters into the realm of the spiritual, does it not? But in Isaiah 55, this is even more dramatically illustrated, and I want to read a couple of sections out of Isaiah 55 to you. The first verses, one, two, ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the water, and you who have no money, come buy and eat, come buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Why do you spend money for what is not bread in your wages, for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and to eat what is good, and delight yourselves in abundance. Incline your ear and come to me, listen that you may live, and I will make an everlasting covenant with you according to the faithful mercies shown to David. But drop down, if you will, to verse nine.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and make it bear and sprout and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be which goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty without

accomplishing what I desire and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it to you.

So we have the dimension of the rain of the word of God, of the flourishing of the gospel in the hearts and lives of the peoples and nations, and it's upon the latter that I wish to focus at this time. Oh, much more could be said about the rain that waters the earth than me. We may very well be lined up as a nation for the most awful season of drought that the nation has ever known.

But for those of us who love our Lord and Savior and his kingdom, we wouldn't nearly care all that much if we died of hunger and thirst. It wouldn't really mean nearly as much to us as if we die and we see the multitudes all around us, ignorant of our dear Savior and the church continuing to slide and slide. I think often of the prayer that so gripped the heart of that wonderful physician, preacher in the city of London, Martin Lloyd-Jones, who Sunday after Sunday pled with God for an outpouring of the Spirit upon the land, and who often voiced to his fellows that his greatest hope was that he would not die without first seeing and outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

And as I grow older and weaker, more and more I bear that same hope that before my eyes close and I pass into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, my heart might brighten with the realization that our King has come among us in reviving power. But it's senseless to hope that he will pour rain upon us if we're not thirsty. Now I've been thinking about this for some time.

Now the subject of thirst is truly a biblical subject. It's not really an Old Testament issue. I often preach out of the book of Jude, and so often I'm moved afresh by those five syllogisms of nature, or similitudes I should say, of nature that appear in verses 12 and 13 of the book of Jude, when he speaks about those who are uncharted reefs in the love feast, and those who are clouds without water, and those who are trees without fruit, and those who are wild raging waves of the sea casting up their own shame, and those who are wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.

And turning that passage around, they are such beautiful pictures to launch our lives into, and to lay hold of and say, O God, may the rest of my days be lived out as a charted reef, so that my life itself forms a safe harbor for all the lost souls around me. O God, may I never again be a dry cloud, but may there always be the abundance of the rain of your mercy out of my life. May I never be a fruitless tree, but O God, that every hungry man and woman that draws near to me will gain strength and nourishment from my walk with Christ.

O Lord, that I might be a gentle wave of the ocean, so that any person in an uproar in their lives can say, if I can just sit down next to Mr. Roberts, where the peace of God reigns, then his peace will be near me. And O, that I might die as I live, as a thick sky, so that anybody in all my world can get their bearings by knowing where I'm at. Jude was burdened about clouds without water, and we have many of those around us, and indeed some of us may be dry clouds ourselves.

Peter was concerned about this same issue in his first epistle, chapter 2, verse 17. He said, these are springs without water and mist driven by a storm for whom the black darkness has been reserved. And our Savior himself declared, if any man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.

He who believes in me, as the scripture said, from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water. But let's focus upon this incredibly urgent expression, if any man thirst. I've been reflecting upon this.

I've jotted down 10 things that keep us from the kind of thirst that results in the outpouring of God's grace and blessing upon us. Now all of us have noticed, especially at holiday times, but always really when we've had a large meal, that the thought of eating again is ridiculous. I've said at the table sometimes, well now I feel as if I can go for weeks without another morsel and without another drop to drink.

Clearly, when we're full, we lack both hunger and thirst. And as I look around me and see how few in the church demonstrate any genuine thirst, I don't see how I can avoid thinking they're already full, but not full of Christ, but of themselves. And is this not the heart of the first four Beatitudes? Sammy, I think, recited the Beatitudes to us earlier, but I think coming back several times in a row to a same passage may bring it into a fresh light for us.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are they that mourn, they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled, not with themselves, but with righteousness. It seems to me that this passage is arranged in a very profound fashion. As I've contemplated the matter, it seems to me it's only possible for mere humans like us to relate in three realms.

By God's grace, we have the capacity in Christ Jesus to relate upwardly to God. We can relate appropriately, outwardly to one another, and even those outside the kingdom. And by God's grace, and this is desperately needed in multitudes of life, we can relate to ourselves.

We can be peaceful, and peaceful. We can be relaxed. I think one of the major reasons so little praying goes on is because we're racing about, trying somehow to fill the void with busyness.

But if I'm correct in what I've just said, it's possible for humans to relate in three dimensions, upwardly with God, inwardly with self, outwardly with others. Then it's quite clear that before we really hunger and thirst for righteousness, we must be emptied in those three realms. And over and over I've observed individuals who admit to God that he's everything, and even admit to themselves that they're nothing.

But then they get in front of their church world, and they pretend to be something that they've already told God they are not, and admit it to themselves. I believe that when our Savior pronounced his blessing upon the meek, that really what he had in mind was a meek person is the person who admits to their world what they've admitted to God and themselves. We do not hunger, and we do not thirst to the degree that is appropriate, because we are altogether too full of ourselves.

And I've often asked congregations to think with me about this kind of a possible incident. A woman with four children has been abandoned by her husband, and she's having one dreadful time just keeping going. She desperately needed a job, but she desperately needed to be home with the young children when they were not in school.

Finally she got a job that permitted her to work just during school hours, but it paid very little. And one week she realized on Tuesday that she had a dollar ninety-four cents, and payday was not until Friday, and there was nothing to serve the children. So with great difficulty she tried to keep herself composed and to behave warmly toward the children and not to pass her worry on to them.

And she succeeded in sending them off to school with a great deal of love and a sense of security. But as she made her way to work herself, she kept saying, how am I going to feed these children for the next

several days? And as she passed the convenience store, she saw that they had milk, a dollar ninety-four, a gallon, and no tax. So when she left work that afternoon, she raced to the convenience store, she bought a gallon of milk, she made her way home, she placed it in the dilapidated refrigerator, and then she got herself ready to greet the children and to make them feel as they truly were loved by her.

But after a while they were saying, mom we're hungry, what's to eat? So she drags her feet into the kitchen, she has just a wee bit of oatmeal and the milk, but when she opens the refrigerator door, she burst into a sob because she discovers that there was a hole in the bottom of the jug and it has already leaked out three quarts of that precious liquid. She hustles about, what can I do? What can I do? And she looks under the sink and she discovers that the glass jug, it's only got a quart of vinegar left, and she pours her quart of milk in upon the quart of vinegar. Would you like to share their oatmeal? My dear friends, you can never be full of the righteousness of Christ when you're partially full of yourself.

When you do, you create a bitter mess, a very unpleasant concoction that nobody wants to share, and before ever we can truly hunger and thirst, we've got to be sure that we're emptied of self. And clearly part of the purpose of this gathering this week is that the last vestige of self might be gone and all of the fullness of Christ will be ours, that indeed our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount will be working on our behalf. We will be hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and as he guarantees it, we shall be full of himself.

Another reason it appears to me why we don't thirst as we might, and I found even myself that on a hot summer day, if I can find some trees to get under, I don't thirst quite so badly. And I fear that what many of us have done is to create a grove of trees by our own pride that effectively shield us from the rays of the righteous Son of God. And at times when we should be desperately thirsty and longing ever so greatly for the fresh moisture of God himself, we are immune to it because we have sheltered ourselves in our own pride.

I don't believe the nation has ever been in such a terrible grip of pride than the nation of churches in America is right now. Is it not astonishing when at the church is at its lowest level in our history, we are acting as if the Lord has never had greater reason to rejoice in his people than he does in us? And it flabbergasts me regularly when I realize that even in that relatively small portion of churches that still has some kind of a corporate prayer meeting, they waste the bulk of their time on silly things that God has already taken care of. And the great eternal issues are by and large left unmentioned in corporate prayer.

But in our lives, we don't feel anywhere near the level of thirst that we should because our own pride has sheltered us from the reality of the ridiculous mess in which we find ourselves. I find also that the more you exercise, the more thirsty you are. And if somehow we can manage and not to exercise spiritually, then indeed we can keep ourselves from an appropriate level of thirst.

Now, not that we're inactive. I don't mean to suggest that in any sense. But I don't meet many people who are exercising themselves spiritually, who are so deeply in love with Christ and his word that there is always increasing hunger in them.

Because after all, the more you know, the more you want to know. But when you're happy with a wee bit of knowledge and content with ever so slight a spiritual experience, there's no real hunger. If we would learn to get busy about that which really matters, instead of the busyness that grips us so frequently, there isn't any question but what our thirst for righteousness would be wonderfully enhanced.

It seems to me also that many in the church manage to assuage whatever thirst they have by drinking from fountains that are corrupt. And I don't know about you, but one taste of bitter water is enough. If we allow ourselves to be held in the grip of our love of pleasure in sin, we will not know what it means to thirst for righteousness.

I love the words that were spoken about Moses in the 11th chapter of Hebrews. I'd like to read a wee bit to you from that incredible passage by Faith Moses when he'd grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasure of Egypt, for he was looking for the reward. Whenever we satiate our thirst and our hunger with unworthy and illegal wrongful things like the pleasures of sin, we will keep ourselves from any serious hungering after God.

But also I observe that when the church creates a spiritual mediocrity, and I believe that most of our churches have done exactly that, they have created a norm for Christianity which is so low that no demon in hell even has to feel a moment of trouble. I've heard people say concerning a new convert whispering among themselves, don't worry we'll soon have that fellow down to our level. And indeed what a wicked thing when we conspire together to keep one another from moving forward spiritually when the church is designed by God to be a conspiracy of righteousness where we help everyone forward in the things of Christ.

Spiritual mediocrity breeds lack of thirst for righteousness, and what a grievously prevailing wickedness that is. Now I find, and I suppose that you found this also, that I don't thirst nearly as much when it's 30 below zero than when it's 110 above. And I believe the ice-cold atmosphere of our churches has created a situation in which there is virtually no thirsting for righteousness.

But also we live at a time when the thinking of multitudes is so warped, and our culture really assists us greatly in this grievous error. Our culture tricks us into believing that dryness is normal, that indeed if you have any real hunger and thirst you're abnormal. So our churches teach much more about intellectual assent than about heartfelt religion.

Dry faith is much more promoted than glorious experiences. And I've had dealings with pastors who've said to their congregation, I don't know why you're all agitated about that, I've never had such an experience. Years and years ago I was ministering in the Pacific Northwest, and the family came under profound conviction and concern, but they didn't reach any closure with Christ on that occasion.

Instead they went to their local church the next Sunday, and they had not been in the habit of going, and they approached the pastor and they asked him how one could really know that their sins were forgiven. And he said to them, who have you been talking to? Oh they said that young itinerant, Richard Owen Roberts. Oh I know about him, he's just a fool, don't pay any attention to him.

I've never had such an experience, why should you? And they lost totally their appetite. Now that's not uncommon. All around us are those who are discouraging those who have even a wee bit of thirst and hunger.

Our culture, I say, adds to our lack of thirst. And then of course, when we're in a drunken state, we don't have the kind of thirst that's appropriate. And it appears to me that in our society, and in our churches, we are intoxicated on the wine of prosperity.

And we have so much that is worthless that we have no hunger and no thirst for that which is eternal. And then I've observed also that when a person is in the fever of lust and greed, they can find satisfaction over some filthy and vile act. And they have no place for hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

And finally our absurd busyness. I was thinking this morning of a situation years and years ago. Some of you know that Maggie and I have been tent makers through the years.

And we have supported ourselves and our ministry largely through the buying and selling of theological libraries. But near 50 years ago, I was in Europe buying books by the tens of thousands. And I got into a little village in the Principality of Wales.

And I asked the bookstore keeper if he had any evangelical theology. And he stared at me. He said, are you out of your mind? No.

Do you have any? Who would want such junk as that? He said, I've got a whole schoolhouse full of that kind of stuff. And he let me into the schoolhouse and he told the truth. Tens of thousands of great volumes of the Puritans and the Reformers, just a treasure house.

I was so excited. I didn't have a bite to eat nor a drop to drink. 12, 15 hours every day piling up these great treasures.

Busyness, busyness, busyness, it keeps us from that hungering and thirsting that is so urgently needed and is so vital if indeed the Lord is to pour water upon those who are thirsty and floods upon the dry ground. I think there are a few steps we need to deliberately take. First, we need to admit our dryness.

It may be hard for some who have pretended to know the fullness of Christ, but it's necessary. Admit how dry you are. Number two, repent of whatever the causes are.

I gave you 10 possibilities. There might well be 20 more that you know to be true. But whatever the causes that have kept you from hungering and thirsting for righteousness, repent and do that now.

Not say to yourself, well, at the end of the week I'll see what the cumulative impact is and then I'll consider what I should do. No, if you don't act at an appropriate time, the urgency of doing so is quickly lost. And when we face the reality of our need and in an urgent total way have repented, then indeed we have but to thirst and we shall be full.

And why should we not live as those persons who are in a desert, for we really are living in a desert land? And why should our focus not continually be upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ that we long to be perpetually filled with? And is it not right that we should enter into a covenant? Lord, I've wasted too many years of my life where I was satisfied with a wee bit of moisture instead of the fullness of your righteousness. Now I enter into a covenant to live out the rest of my days with my heart set to seek perpetually the great outpouring of water upon the thirsty. And then why not band with some fellows in consistent prayer year after year, praying together with a group.

Oh God, pour out your spirit upon the thirsty. Pour floods upon dry land. Then don't insult the Lord by living in doubt.

Believe that the Lord keeps his word and get ready for an incredible outpouring. It's awfully wrong to ask God for something and then not get ready for the answer when it comes. Lord, in Jesus' name, help us.

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