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Sermon Summary

Come, Holy Spirit! Reflections on Revival on Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost is the day in the church calendar that typically comes 50 days after Easter. This year it is celebrated today, May 27. As you probably know, it was on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the followers of Jesus. This was the event that fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus to his disciples in Luke 24:49 – “And behold,” said Jesus, “I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” Clearly, then, the focus of Pentecost is *the coming of the Holy Spirit*, his indwelling presence in our lives, and the power that he brings to enable us to do what we otherwise could never accomplish. Today, I want to focus on one particular feature of the Spirit’s work, what we typically call “revival.”

It grieves me to say that when I was growing up, the word *revival* meant one thing: going to church on weeknights and listening to a man "Shout!" his sermons. All of us have probably faced the struggle of overcoming caricatures of revival, everything from images of Elmer Gantry to Neil Diamond's famous song, "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show."

I had to face the fact that no matter what my experience had been early in life, it was wrong of me to equate revival with an evangelistic campaign. There is nothing wrong with evangelistic campaigns, or with attending church on a weeknight, or with loud preaching. But none of this is revival. You can't *schedule* revival. Revival cannot be predicted, but neither can it be precluded. **There simply are no natural laws that guarantee revival.**

What, then, is revival? Someone has defined revival as "a copious effusion of the influence of divine grace," i.e., a bountiful outpouring of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. J. I. Packer defines revival as "a work of God by his Spirit through his word bringing the spiritually dead to living faith in Christ and renewing the inner life of Christians who have grown slack and sleepy" (*Revival*, 36). Or again,

"Revival is God stirring the hearts of his people, visiting them . . . coming to dwell with them . . . returning to them . . . pouring out his Spirit on them . . . to quicken their consciences, show them their sins, and exalt his mercy . . . before their eyes" (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 256).

When I think of revival, the word *refreshing* also comes to mind. It reminds me of that rather old summer TV commercial for Lipton Iced Tea where a tired and thirsty worker plunges backwards into cool waters on a hot and steamy day. The biblical counterpart to this experience is found in Psalm 36:7-8 where the psalmist declares, "How precious is Thy lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Thy wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Thy house; and Thou dost give them to drink of the river of Thy delights!" Who among us doesn't want to slake our spiritual thirst in the river of God's delights? Whether we call it revival or refreshing or renewal, we want it!

All of us long for a visitation from God. Is there a Christian who does not yearn to see an outpouring of the Spirit from on high? My heart cries out with the prayers of Scripture for true, heaven-sent, Christ-exalting revival:

“Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine; . . . Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name! Restore us [or **revive us**], O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:14, 18-19).

“Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us! Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not **revive** us again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation (Ps. 85:4-7).

“My soul clings to the dust; give me life [or **revive me**] according to your word” (Ps. 119:25).

“Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things, and give me life [or **revive me**] in your ways” (Ps. 119:37).

“Hear my voice according to your steadfast love; O Lord, according to your justice give me life [or **revive me**]” (Ps. 119:149).

“O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence” (Isa. 64:1).

Before we go any farther, however, there are three things to keep in mind regarding true revival.

1. **True revival is a sovereign work of God** (Zech. 4:6). In other words, revival is always a miracle. Revival is not “in our pocket.” We can neither command revival nor predict it. Once we fall into the trap of thinking that revival is at our beck-and-call, we will begin to develop earthly strategies that we are convinced will produce the desired end. We will become sinfully pragmatic in the business of religion, as we justify virtually any tactic or method just so long as it gets “results”. But this is precisely what we must avoid at all costs.

2. **True revival is also a surprising work of God.** This is because revival is a gracious work of God. No one deserves revival. One may never expect what one does not deserve. If God were not to send revival, no one could protest that an injustice had been done. That is why we must never *demand* revival, as if God were in our debt. God is not obligated to visit us with the refreshing waters of his presence. That he occasionally does is an expression of mercy. It is the compassion and lovingkindness of God that accounts for revival.

3. **True revival is a sudden work of God.** It frequently comes without preparation or planning. Revival is like the sudden spring thunderstorm that bursts from the sky when only moments before the sun shined brightly. Virtually every revival in the history of the church came without warning. Even when revival came upon those who were fasting and praying for it, their testimony reveals that they were, nonetheless, caught off-guard by the sudden effusion of divine favor.

But if revival is a sovereign, surprising and sudden work of God, does that mean *we are to do nothing*? No. Passivity is never justified. In fact, there are at least three things that we are to do.

First, as with salvation and healing, both of which are sovereign works of God, we are to *pray* for revival. There is nothing inconsistent with praying for that which is a sovereign and surprising work of God, for even prayer is God’s gift to us! A. W. Tozer reminds us that when we feel stirred to seek after Christ, “**God is always previous!**”

Look again at Ps. 85:6 – “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (cf. Ps. 80:14, 18-19; Ps. 119:25; 119:37; 119:149; Hab. 3:2; Acts 4:29-31). The people of God never presume that revival will come whether they pray or not. They fervently beseech the Father for a visitation, and so must we. Jonathan Edwards put it this way:

“There is no way that Christians in a private capacity can do so much to promote the work of God, and advance the kingdom of Christ, as by prayer. . . . Let persons be never so weak, and never so mean, and under never so poor advantages to do much for Christ and the souls of men otherwise; yet, if they have much of the spirit of grace and supplication, in this way they may have power with him that is infinite in power, and has the government of the whole world: and so a poor man in his cottage may have a blessed influence all over the world. **God is, if I may so say, at the**

command of the prayer of faith; and in this respect is, as it were, under the power of his people" (*Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* [Yale, 1972], 518).

But before you begin your prayers for revival, be forewarned: *prayer for revival can be costly*. It may cost you your comfort and convenience. Our tendency is to pray for revival, because we think that is the religious thing to do, only later to say, after revival has come: "Oh my! This isn't at all what I had in mind!"

We *say* we want revival . . . but on *our* terms. Sadly, we pray, "Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if you promise in advance to do things the way we have always done them in our church."

Or we pray, "Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if I have some sort of prior guarantee that when you show up you won't embarrass me."

Or again, we pray, "Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if your work of revival is one that I can still control, one that preserves intact the traditions with which I am comfortable."

"Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if your work of revival is neat and tidy and dignified and understandable and above all else socially acceptable."

"Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if you plan to change others; only if you make them to be like me; only if you convict their hearts so they will live and dress and talk like I do."

"Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if you let us preserve our distinctives and retain our differences from others whom we find offensive."

If your prayers for revival mask a hidden agenda, please, don't pray. We would do well to remember the wise words of J. I. Packer:

"Renewal in all its aspects is not a theme for dilettante debate, but for humble, penitent, prayerful, faith-full exploration before the Lord, with a willingness to change and be changed, and if necessary to be the first to be changed, if that is what the truth proves to require. To absorb ideas about renewal ordinarily costs nothing, but to enter into renewal could cost us everything we have, and we shall be very guilty if, having come to understand renewal, we then decline it. We need to be clear about that. John Calvin once declared that it would be better for a preacher to break his neck while mounting the pulpit if he did not himself intend to be the first to follow God. In the same way, it would be better for us not to touch the study of renewal at all if we are not ourselves ready to be the first to be renewed" (*Revival*, 6-7).

Second, *although we cannot revive ourselves, we must be diligent to remove any obstacles we have previously placed in God's way*. Here are several of those obstacles.

1. The fact is, pastors and church leaders are often loudest and most zealous in their cry for revival and among the most critical when it comes. Some are threatened by it. It is crucial to remember that revival is never a one-man-show, but all too often one man can kill it.

2. Another obstacle is formalism, which refers to a style of worship that quenches the Spirit of revival. Many churches, says Packer, "seem to view worship in a way that can only be called formalistic, for their interest is limited to performing set routines with suitable correctness, and there is no apparent desire on anyone's part actually to meet God" (42).

3. Complacency, or spiritual smugness, is the enemy of revival. Here I have in mind a "things-are-OK-as-they-are" mentality that settles for so much less than what God wants to give (cf. Rev. 3:14-22). When we ask why revival has not come, perhaps the answer is "because we are content to live without it" (L. Ravenhill).

4. Traditionalism is especially inimical to revival. Packer defines it this way: "There is a subtle tenacity abroad that remains wedded to the way things were done a hundred years ago. It thinks that it renders God service by being 'faithful' (that is the word used) to these outmoded fashions; it never faces the possibility that they might need amending today if ever we are to communicate effectively with each other and with those outside our circles" (*Keep in Step*, 253).

The point is: Don't let your grooves become graves! After all, "the Holy Spirit is not a sentimentalist as too many of us are; he is a change agent, and he comes to change human structures as well as human hearts. Change for its own sake is mere fidgeting, but change that gets rid of obstacles to God's fullest blessing is both a necessity and a mercy" (*ibid.*, 253-54).

We must all ask the question of ourselves: ***How much change am I willing to accept in order to reach the point where the Holy Spirit is no longer quenched?***

5. There is yet one more obstacle that John Piper calls *the verbalized institutionalization of caution*. He means those long and impassioned warnings about excess that effectively scare people into a spirit-quenching rigidity, reluctance, and close-mindedness. We can talk all we want about being willing for God to have his way with us, but if we conclude our appeal with frightening portraits of so-called "charismatic extremes" the average Christian will stop dead in his tracks as if at a red light.

Third, we are also responsible, in God's power and by means of his grace, to ***cultivate those qualities of character, those spiritual virtues that please him***. I'm thinking in particular, of the responsibility placed upon us in 2 Chron. 7:11-14 regarding *humility, diligent, fervent prayer, and seeking God's face*.

One of the greatest obstacles to revival is ***pride***. To be honest, several passages of Scripture frighten me. In Ps. 138:6 we are told that "though the Lord is exalted, . . . he regards the lowly. But the haughty (or proud) he knows from afar." This is a nice way of saying that God has no intention of going anywhere near the proud. He keeps the arrogant at arm's length, so to speak. If revival is God drawing near to his people, pride must be crucified (see also Isa. 57:15; 66:1-2; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5-6).

Humility entails an openness to do whatever God says, to follow him wherever he leads, regardless of the social, personal, physical, or financial cost. Pride often manifests its ugly head in the form of self-sufficiency, a demand for control over what God is doing, a reluctance to trust God with our emotions, and an excessive concern for reputation and image.

Let me add a personal word of confession. For years I was quick to affirm with everyone else that I was "open" to revival. But I was self-deceived. Whereas I publicly declared a desire for revival, what I really wanted was the perpetuation of what I understood and what made me feel comfortable. ***And it was all too easy to identify my comfort with God's will!*** A passionate desire for revival is when we cry out for God's will even if it means the dissolution of our own comfort and convenience.

Another key factor, as noted above, is ***prayer***. Jonathan Edwards put it this way: "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 shew his church their great need of it, and to bring 'em into distress for want of it, and so put 'em upon crying earnestly to him for it" (*Some Thoughts*, 517). Consider the following texts:

"On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; all day and all night they will never keep silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest for yourselves; and *give him no rest until he establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth*" (Isa. 62:6-7).

"Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it, the Lord is his name, 'Call to me, and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know'" (Jer. 33:2-3; cf. also Zech. 8:20-23).

But how do we know when we've prayed enough? It is reported that on several occasions during the Welsh revival (1904-06) that people could be heard crying out: "No more, Lord Jesus, lest I die." The point is this:

You *want* revival when you pray for more of Christ. You are *in* revival when you've got so much of him that you're forced to say, "Stop, no more!"

We are also exhorted to *seek* God's face, by which is meant an insatiable hunger and unquenchable thirst for God. During the revivals under Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18:6 and under Josiah in 2 Kings 23:25 it is said that they "cleaved" unto God (cf. Gen. 2:24; Dt. 11:22; 30:20). Thus what we seek in revival is *God himself, his presence, his blessings, his manifestation* in our lives, union and communion with *him* (see Pss. 24:6; 63:1-2,8; 69:32; 73:25)!

The Characteristics of Revival

We now need to look at the characteristics of biblical revival. But in doing so we must be careful not to assume that all future revivals will look the same as those in the past. The needs of God's people often change, as well as the cultural context in which the revivals occur. And let's never forget that God is infinitely creative and never quite repeats himself. He takes great delight in doing new things in fresh and unexpected ways.

So what are the characteristics of true revival? What does it look like? If it were to come, how would we know? What should we pray for? What should we look for? Let me mention just ten features of true, biblical revival.

1. **God draws near. God comes down.** This is certainly the imagery found in Isa. 64:1-2 where God's presence is portrayed in terms of a brushfire. "It is with this searching, scorching manifestation of God's presence that renewal begins, and by its continuance that renewal is sustained" (Ibid., 26).

During the Welsh revival one pastor said: "If one were asked to describe in a word the outstanding feature of those days, one would unhesitatingly reply that it was a universal, inescapable sense of the presence of God. . . . the Lord had come down! A sense of the Lord's presence was everywhere. It pervaded, nay it created the spiritual atmosphere."

What I have in mind is not simply the presence of God by which he fills the universe with his being. God is *omnipresent*. He is everywhere present at every moment. But on occasion, as in times of revival, he *manifests* or displays his presence in an unusual and often miraculous way.

2. **Sin is sensed.** Sensitivity to sin is intensified. Conviction strikes deep. Conscience is tenderized; calloused hearts are broken; fresh wounds are opened. Things that once were tolerated or ignored suddenly become intolerable. Complacency is shattered. All of which produces heart-felt repentance.

When God draws near in revival, the soul is turned inside out. One's spirit is suddenly confronted with just how sinful sin really is. When Isaiah drew near to God, conviction for sin which he had never before known suddenly erupted from within his heart (Isa. 6:1ff.).

3. **God's Word is embraced.** People fall in love with the Bible and experience a sudden passionate responsiveness to the Scriptures. See 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13; Neh. 8; 2 Chron. 17:9. The message of the Bible is more deeply cherished and its commands more radically obeyed.

4. **The Church becomes the Church.** There is a sudden increase and vitality in community. There is a renewed sense of love, unity, generosity, self-sacrifice, and a desire for corporate gatherings (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). *When revival comes Christians are actually miserable when they aren't together!*

5. **Evangelistic zeal is intensified. Love for the lost deepens.** The commitment of the church to missions is always increased during times of revival. It is estimated that @ 50,000 were saved in New England during the Great Awakening and an additional 300,000 throughout the 13 colonies. David Bryant explains:

"When God awakens us to Himself He awakens us to the whole earth. As He shows us Christ, He also shows us His worldwide purpose in Christ, the world full of possibilities for fulfilling that

purpose through Christ and a world full of people without Christ who are currently beyond the reach of the gospel" (*Concerts of Prayer*, 88-89).

6. **Social justice is pursued.** Micah 6:8 (the love of justice and mercy) becomes real. There is renewed concern for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the homeless, the hungry. The truth of Luke 4:16-21 (ministry to the poor, the captives, the downtrodden) grips the church.

7. **Routine things occur rapidly.** In times of revival there is both a *quicken*ing and a *deepen*ing of spiritual growth and of individual maturity. Two words characterize everything that happens during revival: *acceleration and intensification*. Spiritual experience goes deeper and change happens faster. The only problem is that this often scares people because it's so different from what they are accustomed to in their lives and in the experience of the church.

Jonathan Edwards, in describing the First Great Awakening, said that "when God in so remarkable a manner took the work into his own hands, there was as much done in a day or two as at ordinary times . . . is done in a year."

8. **God is enjoyed.** That simple thought was stunning to me the first time I heard it. The idea that God enjoys being enjoyed jolted my traditional sensibilities. But look at what the psalmist says: "***Wilt Thou not Thyself revive us again, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?***" (Ps. 85:6)

Don't miss what he is saying. This isn't simply a command to rejoice. It is a prayer that God would *revive* his people precisely so that they might *enjoy him*! It isn't simply rejoicing that the psalmist has in view, but finding joy and delight and happiness in God. This invariably occurs during times of revival and refreshing. Much the same thing is promised in Psalm 16:11, where David declares that "in Thy presence is fullness of joy; in Thy right hand there are pleasures forever." The reason God wants us to enjoy him is because *he is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*.

9. **Worship is revitalized** (see 2 Chron. 29:25-30). Edwards reported that during the revival in New England "many express earnest longings of soul to praise God; but at the same time complain that they can't praise him as they would do, and they want to have others help them in praising him: they want to have everyone praise God, and are ready to call upon everything to praise him" (*Faithful Narrative*, 184). His own wife, Sarah, experienced much the same thing. Edwards described her as having

"a great delight in singing praises to God and Jesus Christ, and longing that this present life may be, as it were, one continued song of praise to God; longing, as the person expressed it, to sit and sing this life away; and an overcoming pleasure in the thoughts of spending an eternity in that exercise" (*Some Thoughts*, 337-38).

10. **Shining faces!** I'm not talking about an artificial image or pretense to make others think all is well when it isn't. Nor do I mean a naive, flippant refusal to face the harshness of reality. By "shining faces" I have in mind what Martin Lloyd-Jones described as a pure, unadulterated joy that builds from within and bubbles over onto others. Surely this is what the apostle Peter meant when he spoke of "joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Pt. 1:8). See Psalm 34:4-5.

Resistance to Revival

Why do people respond to revival with fear, skepticism and disgust? There are several reasons:

1. **Revival is always messy.** Inconsistencies and irregularities and inconveniences are always present in revival. "A work of God without stumbling blocks," wrote Edwards, "is never to be expected." Consider the church in Corinth, which experienced first-hand the revival of the first century. "The Corinthian disorders," explains J. I. Packer, "were due to uncontrolled overflow of Holy Spirit life. Many churches today are orderly simply because they are asleep, and with someone fears that it is the sleep of death. ***It is no great thing to have order in a cemetery.*** The real and deplorable carnality and immaturity of the Corinthian Christians, which Paul censures so strongly elsewhere in the letter, must not blind us to the

fact that they were enjoying the ministry of the Holy Spirit in a way in which we today are not" (*Keep in Step*, 249).

2. The Spirit-quenching fear of guilt by association. By this I mean the tendency to shut ourselves off from the work of the Spirit for fear of being linked too closely with people who we believe are an embarrassment to the cause of Christ. When this happens we can find ourselves resisting what God is doing, not so much because we have explicit biblical warrant for doing so, but because people we regard as "weird" are actively involved in its promotion. Our prideful reasoning is both simple and sinful: "There is no way on earth this movement can be of God. After all, look at the *kind* of people who are associated with it."

I am not at all suggesting that we *try* to be weird or that we go out of our way to be offensive to the viewing public. The Bible calls us to be sober-minded, above reproach, and clear-headed in our obedience to God. But if the fear of rejection is quenching our willingness to embrace a move of the Holy Spirit, we must embrace the stigma of appearing foolish in the eyes of men.

3. Revival always disturbs the religious establishment. One of the reasons for this is the tendency of revival to produce new leaders in the church who often lack the education and sophistication of the established clergy. Pastors are only too happy to welcome a fresh move of God until such time as their own prestige and influence begin to wane. When one's flock begin to wander into someone else's fold, all sorts of previously unforeseen objections to revival suddenly become persuasive.

Then, of course, many religious leaders are extremely protective of long-standing traditions. Revival often brings in its wake new expressions of worship, new styles of preaching, new schedules in the life of a church, and most anything *new* is unwelcome to those who have worked hard and given their lives to building up and preserving what is *old*. Both their identity and power are wrapped up in preserving the status quo.

4. People grow angry when they are afraid, and they are afraid of whatever they don't understand. And they typically don't understand what they've never personally experienced. What this means is that when something new and unexpected occurs, many people are frightened and find every reason possible to conclude that this is something other than God at work.

5. "All things must be done decently and in order." Certainly our God is a God of order and peace. But *the bringing in of order can occasionally be a disorderly process*. In true revival, says John White, "chaos and darkness flee, but they create a ruckus as they leave" (*Ibid.*, 44).

6. "Whenever the kingdom advances, the front line is perceived as scum" (White, *When the Spirit Comes*, 46). I don't think that needs much explanation!

7. The fear of excessive emotion. No one wants emotion for its own sake. But when the Spirit ignites our passion for the Son of God and fills us with joy inexpressible and full of glory, it is hard to sit quietly and feel nothing.

8. Satan keeps pace! Whatever and whenever God blesses, Satan curses. What God creates, Satan counterfeits. Let us be especially careful, therefore, not to deny the existence of the original simply because we have been burned by the fake.

Conclusion: