

REVIVE US AGAIN

Psalm 85

Today we're not talking about New Year's resolutions. We're talking about revival. A resolution is something I think I can do. Revival is something God does.

What is revival? It's what it sounds like: re-vive – "To live again" as one commentator put it.¹ When something that was once alive but now appears or feels dead is brought back to life. Tim Keller describes revival as "the intensification of the ordinary operation of the work of the Holy Spirit, occurring mainly through the ordinary 'instituted means of grace'—preaching, pastoring, worship, and prayer."²

God says to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:

"I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." (Revelation 2:3-4). The church had lost something central. Something in them was dead and needed reviving. They had lost Jesus as their first love.

Though revival often has sweeping effects on whole communities or countries, it always begins in the church – among Christians. We see revivals throughout the Old Testament under kings like Josiah and Hezekiah and leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah. Our country has had at least two "Great Awakenings" (pastors like Jonathan Edwards) and even recent works of the Spirit across college campuses.

Why preach on revival? Since my senior year in college, I've had a growing sense of a need for personal revival, but over the last year, it has become a growing burden on my heart, not just for personal revival, but for revival at Altadena Valley and in the American Church.

The pull of the culture is strong to trade our first love of Jesus for an infatuation with the American Dream. In the South especially, it feels difficult to distinguish between American culture and Christ's culture. Am I following Jesus or myself? We begin to take sin lightly, to go with the cultural flow, to speak in the universal language of cynicism, to allow a divisive spirit to grow, to put our light under a bushel and just hide.

The prayer in Psalm 85 calls out in the midst of that: "Revive us again!"

To help us walk through the psalm, you'll notice the outline is different parts of a tree, not just because I love trees, but because a tree pictures so well the message of Psalm 85 – a sick, half-dead tree coming back to life and vitality.

¹ The Gordon Review

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/rumblings-revival-gen-z/>

We'll start with the soil of revival, then discover revival's roots, climb the trunk and end with its fruit. (feel free to take notes or draw your notes)

I. **Revival's Soil (1-3)**

By the soil of revival, I mean the conditions that revival springs from. We'll note two:

1) Recognition of Deadness – Revival often comes in the wake of some catastrophe, some spiritual decline, often connected with the sin of God's people.

Vv 1-3 imply a past time of catastrophe and deadness in Israel's past that God powerfully brought them out of:

“Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob, You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin. You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger.”

Notice the past tense. There had been some catastrophe, some devastating circumstance, that led Israel to cry out to God. And he was favorable to them. He restored them. He forgave them. He withdrew his anger at their sin.

This Psalm could have been penned after the return from exile in Babylon. They go into exile for 70 years for their unrepentant, prolonged sin, and God hears their prayers in exile and brings them back. But once home, they stumble around in the wreckage of the temple and the rubble of their homes – everywhere they looked was utter ruin.³

As one of my professors, Allen Ross put it, “the promises of God seemed to lag behind the harsh realities of life.”⁴

What kind of devastation do we see as we look around today? In the world? In the Church? Is the soil being churned for revival?

Consider this quote from a pastor involved with college ministry in the Midwest about the rising generation:

Gen Z is spiritually starved. The disorienting circumstances of the last four years—a global pandemic,...mass shootings [and senseless violence], [wars, political chaos], rapid inflation, and abuse scandals —have created a famine of identity, purpose, and belonging. Gen Z is hungry for the very things the empty, desiccated temples of secularism, consumerism, and...digital media cannot provide, but which Jesus can.

³ Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol 2, p. 764.

⁴ Ross, p. 767.

Gen Z ranges from ages 12-27. Do you resonate with their assessment? Gen Z'ers in here, do you feel that? An honest recognition of the ruin that comes of sin, not just sin of the world but of the Church.

Jesus' words to the church in Sardis are helpful: "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1b).

What deadness is there here at Altadena that needs reviving?

Revival grows in the soil of honest recognition of areas of deadness and ruin.

But there's something else we see in the soil:

2) Fresh awareness of sin – we connect the dots from the devastation we see in the culture to the deadness in *us*. That our sin individually and corporately as the body of Christ has contributed to the brokenness we see – that there is a deadness in us that only Jesus can bring back to life.

When God works to revive his people, he brings them fresh eyes to see their sin.

One sermon I came across is entitled: "Revival is Like Judgment Day." The preacher described how "the coming of revival is almost always marked by a radical work of God in dealing with the sins of believers."⁵

This is a central element in all reviving works of God – saw it in a 2023 Asbury University chapel service that began business as usual and lasted 16 days. One of the things that happened was students confessing their sin – specific sin like unforgiveness, pornography addiction, substance abuse, sports idolatry, and jealousy.⁶

As God revives his people, sin goes from something I don't like to think about to *all* I can think about until I bring it into the light of God's mercy in Christ.

Into this soil of brokenness and neediness, the roots of revival grow.

II. Revival's Roots (4-7)

Roots carry nutrients and water up from the soil. They are the unseen movers causing growth.

⁵ David Guzik, Blue Letter Bible App

⁶ Billy Coppedge, *The Asbury Revival and our Hunger for God* (online article).

What are the roots, or causes, of revival?

- 1) God – God alone works revival – Revival is not manmade. You can't schedule it or force it. Since made us alive in Christ, only he can revive us.

The Sons of Korah appealed to God in v 4: "Restore us again, O God of our salvation." God, restore us. No one else can.

Picture Elijah in the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:

"I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ [God] asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Sovereign Lord, *you* alone know."

Notice the flow of the prayer: "God you've restored and revived your people in the past; do it again!"

[I can hear the exasperation in our one-year-old daughter Austin Kate's voice when she looks up and cries: "Up! Up!" There's an urgency and desperation in her eyes. If she could talk, she might say, "Dada, I know you can pick me up because you've done it in the past – do it again!"]

God works revival in his Church. He has done it in the past. He alone can do it again.

The second root, or cause, of revival is *us*, specifically prayer:

- 2) Prayer – God does the reviving – we do the asking.
The central prayer of Psalm 85 is v 6: "Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?"

The phrase "revive us again" means simply: "make us live again." Re-vive us. Resuscitate us. Bring new life to the deadness, the dryness, the numbness, the areas of rot.

V. 7 shows how they anticipated the revival would take place – by a tangible experience of God's love: "Show us your steadfast love, O LORD." – Show us, cause us to tangibly see and experience your love in a new way. Not just any love, your steadfast love – hesed – your covenant love, loyal love, a love that will not let me go.

Brother, sister, have you experienced the love of God recently? I mean truly experienced it. Do you know the love of the Father?

God alone works revival, but he invites us to ask for it.

These two roots shoot up, forming the trunk in verses 8-9:

III. Revival's Trunk (8-9)

The trunk of a tree is sturdy, strong, immovable.

The trunk of revival is made up of the promises of God.

In v 8, there's a shift in the tone of the Psalm from asking to listening:

(8) "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak"

As if the sons of Korah put down their pen mid-psalm to listen for God's answer. And as they wait in stillness, the answer comes in the form of two promises:

1) Peace – (8) "God will speak peace to his people, to his saints"

This word "peace" in the original is "shalom" – literally meaning "whole"⁷ – refers to comprehensive wholeness – deadness removed and life restored in every way.

The second promise is in v 9:

2) Salvation – "Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him" – so near they could taste it. As near as Gandalf charging down the hill to Helm's Deep.

Notice who his salvation is near to: "those who fear him" – in other words, those who see that they need saving. Goes back to the soil of revival: revival grows in the soil of neediness, in broken heart crying, "Up, up!" – As Jesus put it, "blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

That is the effect of these two promises: immediate and immense comfort. "No, I don't see the specific answers to prayer now, but I know that God hears my prayer, and he has promised peace. He will save us from whatever decay has set in.

Note the warning in v. 8: let those who cry for revival never turn back to the folly that led them to decay.

We've climbed the trunk to the fruit that revival bears – what effects does revival have on a community of believers? We'll briefly note four:

⁷ Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon

IV. Revival's Fruit (10-13)

- 1) Joy – v6 “Would you not revive us again, that your people may *rejoice* in you?”

In a survey of revivals in the Old Testament, one recurring effect you see is “unbounded joy,” in the words of Walter Kaiser.⁸

During the revival under Ezra and Nehemiah after the exiles returned, the people wept as they heard Scripture read aloud. But Ezra said, “do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:9-10).

Note the object of joy – “that your people may rejoice *in you*.”

Revival recenters us on the God who revives. We dethrone all false and lesser joys to rejoice in him again. We return to our first love.

Kaiser comments, “people who have little inner joy are likely in desperate need of God’s reviving work.”⁹

- 2) Glory – v 9: “that glory may dwell in our land” – when you see “glory” in the Bible, think of God’s presence with his people.

Revival brings a renewed sense of God’s presence among us. In the words of Helen Lemmel’s hymn, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus; look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.”¹⁰

vv. 10-11 create a beautiful word picture of God’s presence on earth:

“Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.”

Four qualities of God – steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace – converging and creating a new reality. What a stark contrast to the deadness and ruin before revival.

- 3) Increase – see this in v 12: “our land will yield its increase” – certainly includes Kingdom expansion through conversions, but it’s more – God’s reviving work among his people doesn’t just have spiritual effects but also physical – economic

⁸ Walter Kaiser, *Revive Us Again*, p. 13.

⁹ Kaiser, p. 26.

¹⁰ Helen Lemmel, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus*, 1922.

effects, cultural effects. This is not the false prosperity gospel but a preview of heaven, a taste of the garden before there were thorns.¹¹

It's not so much heaven on earth as it is earth looking a little more like heaven – like the throne room in Revelation 4 where the four living creatures never cease to say “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8).

- 4) Future Hope – v. 13: “Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.” Hear the certainty of future victory.

We've climbed the whole tree in this prayer for revival.

But for the Sons of Korah, the answers didn't come in the way they may have hoped. Israel never regained the height of its former flourishing as under King David and Solomon; eventually under the oppressive rule of another power – Rome.

But their prayer was in fact answered in a way that far exceeded their wildest hopes – the coming of One who would spark the greatest revival in salvation history – the One who himself rose from death – the one who said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, but I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

One specific Takeaway/Application:

I invite you to pray with me, “Spirit, revive us again!”

Start with us, God. Start with me. Start with Altadena.

The world needs a revived Church.

This neighborhood needs a revived Altadena.

Risen Christ, revive us again!

¹¹ Kaiser, p. 28.