

Tales for our times

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[0 : 00] The subject this morning, the title is Tales for Our Times. Tales for Our Times. Tales from! Tales from the past, but tales which are completely suitable and necessary for the days in which we live.

And I draw your attention first to a passage in the book of Acts. It's chapter 2, verses 36 to 41. Page numbers always in brackets.

Peter is concluding his first sermon on the day of Pentecost to a vast crowd.

Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this. God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, Brothers, what shall we do? Peter replied, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call. With many other words, he warned them and he pleaded with them, save yourselves from this corrupt generation.

[1 : 37] Those who accepted his message were baptized and about 3,000 were added to their number that day. Well, the results are astonishing.

The results of this single sermon on that one day are astonishing and they're immediate. I draw your attention to verse 37 where it says, When the people heard this message, they were cut to the heart.

I don't know what it may say in your translation of the Bible, but I want to suggest that this is a very deep heart experience that the people were feeling at that time.

It was like a knife going into their insides and they were feeling convinced of their sinfulness before God and that they were in a desperate situation because of that.

So that they say, all of them, as it were, with one voice, they're saying, Brothers, what shall we do? What shall we do?

[2 : 49] We now recognize that something awful has happened and that we are responsible for this and that because of that, there is great guilt upon us.

What shall we do? Conviction of sin. But there's also a wonderful acceptance of the gospel, this good news.

It's interesting that there and then Peter speaks on, he carries on and with many other words, he warned them, saying, Don't let go of this sense of your guilt.

This is a very important moment for you. And he pleaded with them. He pleaded with them in the context of the fact that this was a day when God was speaking to them and it was extremely important that they should do the things that God wanted them to do.

Repent and be baptized. Save yourselves.

[3 : 59] Those who accepted his message, well, they were baptized. And about 3,000 were added to their number that day, which was an astonishing thing. 3,000 is a lot of people.

We're about 45 here today. You know, multiply that by nearly 100. That's an astonishing number of people.

People who are making a very positive response to the gospel and so committing themselves to this truth that they're not just walking away and saying, I'm going to think about it on another day.

They're saying, I need to be baptized.

They didn't have a pool at the time, but somehow or other they got some water and 3,000 went in on that day. It's an astonishing story, isn't it? We're very used to it because we read it so frequently in the book of Acts there.

But this happened. And as a result, there was an immense increase in the church of Jesus Christ. My second passage is in 1 Corinthians chapter 14.

[5 : 01] This is a series we're going through on Sunday evening, so we'll be cropping up against this one in a few weeks' time. 1 Corinthians 14 verses 24 and 25.

So we're thinking a period of time about 20 years after the day of Pentecost. Maybe about 20 years after that time. A generation. So there are now churches throughout much of the known world. And this is one particular church, the church in Corinth. Seaside port church, a cosmopolitan church. A church with many blessings, but also with a huge number of problems as well. Most interesting to see what the Apostle Paul says to these people. 1 Corinthians 14 verses 24 and 25.

It's in the context of tongues, prophecy, what's good, what's better. If an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in through the door, comes in, sits amongst you, while everybody is prophesying, and I take that to mean preaching with authority of the word of God, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all.

[6 : 30] And the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, God is really among you.

And I just want us to think about that particular scene, because Paul is not suggesting this is an extraordinarily unusual thing.

He's saying, this is what might be expected. It might be expected that if you are properly exercising the gifts that God has given to you by his spirit, and if there is proper church life going on, that someone should come through the door, and someone should be in our midst, and he will hear the preaching of the word of God.

And not only that, but he will be convinced by all that he hears that he's a sinner, and he'll be so moved by that reality, that he will fall down on the floor, and confess that God is really in the place. And I find that both challenging and encouraging. Encouraging in the sense that this is clearly not a church which is 100% right.

[7 : 54] There is much sinfulness and inadequacy inside that church. It's also not the church of the day of Pentecost. It's 20 years on. And yet it really is the case that someone might come through the door, and he might actually say, God is really among you.

Sometimes before the meeting starts, we pray in the creche room, and we actually pray this prayer. And sometimes people come to the end of a meeting and say, it was good to be with you.

The Lord really helped me and spoke to me. But I've never seen this. Have any of you ever seen that happening? It's pretty rare, isn't it?

Pretty rare. Conviction of sin, awareness of God, and the worship of God.

There are similar stories throughout the book of Acts. But it isn't limited to the Bible. But there have been subsequent times when God has been so present amongst his people, where people have felt intensely aware of their guilt before him.

[9 : 24] recognizing their need to be reconciled to God. Where people who do not understand are made aware in an instant of the presence, the power, the holiness of God, and their need to be right with him.

We're going to be thinking about this subject today. I put on here a whole list of times in the past, which are recorded as times when the sort of thing that we read about on the day of Pentecost, the sort of thing that we read about in the letter to the Corinthians, actually occurred.

There are people who experienced these things, wrote them down, and they're recorded. It's history. It's happened. It's not a comprehensive list.

And you see it starts there in 1600 and something, mostly because that's where most of the books seem to have the records of these times. And I put in highlight there the times which were almost most remarkable of all.

Many of these situations are fairly geographic. But in times like the Great Awakening, where we have preachers like George Whitefield and John Wesley and a whole host of people whom God raised up, well, there was great works from God happening in this country and in Ireland and in Scotland and in the United States, all about the same period of time, this Great Awakening taking place there.

[11 : 01] Remarkable things happened in 1859, especially in Northern Ireland, it's quite moving to sort of go to the areas, the geographical spots where God by his spirit worked in that particular

locality.

Great movement of the spirit in Wales in 1859. Estimated that 100,000 people became Christians, were converted in 1859 in Wales.

Think of population growth since 1859. That is in a massive proportion of people. People who, by the way, incidentally, who were recorded as, in the large part, staying the course, persevering, and going on to live complete holy lives with Jesus Christ.

The Hebrides, the Isle of Lewis, the most recent record of something of this nature that I'm aware of happening in the United Kingdom. A remarkable story. People alive now who experience those times.

You can go onto YouTube. I did so last night. There's a very nice half-hour program of people being interviewed who experienced the power of God in the Isle of Lewis in that period of time, from 1849 to 1852.

[12:14] Very straightforward people. People just like you and me who experience the power of God, the presence of God, in an awesome fashion.

And so as not to be too parochial, we'll be referring to some of these other situations as well, and Congo as well. One has to say there's probably something of that nature been occurring over a period of time in both Cambodia and in China, periods of such movements.

What can these times be called? Well, I'm going to go back on that one now. An outpouring of the Spirit of God.

That's probably how it's expressed in the Book of Acts, most of all. The Spirit of God was outpoured, but that's a bit of a mouthful. An awakening, because this is work that particularly is done by God's Spirit amongst the people of God.

It's like the people of God being in a state of slumber and sleep and being awakened, and that's why the 1730s was called A Great Awakening. But the name which is most often used of this situation is revival.

[13:28] It's revival. And we read that little section from Habakkuk where he says, Will you not revive us again? Would you revive us again?

Because he recognised that there are great passages of times in all our lives when we are in need of God's reviving work. When you read something like that from the Book of Acts and the Book of Corinthians like that, you have to say, Well, that's something I've never seen, I've never experienced, I've never known the presence of God in that way.

And God's people are encouraged to read the stories of their past in order that they might have a greater awareness of God in their present and might call out to him as these people called out in their days.

Conviction of sin, acceptance of the gospel, awareness of God, worship of God. I raise the subject, I raise the subject because I want to suggest to you that what we experience normally is not necessarily how it always ought to be and not all that it might be.

I want to tell you something about something that happened in East Anglia in 1921.

[15:03] 1921. 92 years ago. There are probably a few people alive who still remember that.

I draw your attention to his angler because he's not that far away, three and a half hours by train. to get to a little seaside place called Loherstoft. And I'm going to tell you this morning something of what happened at Loherstoft in 1921.

Loherstoft, can you see it on the screen up here? There we go. That's Loherstoft. And here's the village of Christchurch. The village of Christchurch. The Church of Christchurch in Loherstoft.

Great to see it. It's still there. You can go onto their website and you can see that they're still preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are a few names I'm going to mention here who are mostly ministers of the gospel.

There's a John Hayes, a Douglas Brown, and a Hugh Ferguson. They were all involved at this time. The people had been praying that there should be a reviving work of God's spirit amongst them.

[16:21] They recognized they had a need and they recognized that the gospel needed to be much more powerful in their little community. 10,000 strong Loherstoft swelled during the summer months by holiday makers and also during the spring time by loads of fishing boats coming down from northeast Scotland to catch the herring.

Loherstoft was a massive fishing port. March 1921, John Hayes said, I want to take you into my church one Wednesday evening.

At a quarter to seven, that church is full. It is bung full and I have to go up in the pulpit and say to the people, my friends, I want those of you who love the Lord Jesus to go out. I want you to go into the parish hall and pray.

They got up and went here and there all over the church. They passed into the parish hall. Some 200 of them gathered there and they held a prayer meeting. Then I had to say to the young men, I want you to get up and sit on the floor at the front.

And we had to get people into that church packed in that way and in the vestry, in the parish hall they were praying. There was a sister praying for her sister who was in the church and at the close of the service that sister came to me and said, I want to talk to you.

[17 : 38] On the following Tuesday evening that sister was led to Christ in my study in answer to the prayer offered in the parish hall. We can never tell you half of the answers to prayer. It's been most wonderful.

Young men praying for the girls to whom they were engaged. Girls praying for their young men. Mothers praying for their boys and their girls. Children praying for their fathers. Friends praying for friends. I remember one night in the church there stood a young man with bowed head and I said, what are you doing here?

I've been praying for my five companions and four of them have come to Jesus and I'm praying for the last one. He's not come tonight. I do not know whether he came. I've not heard the end of the story but that's what's been going on.

A woman whose life and marriage were broken crept into the back of one of the churches where the meetings were being held and listened to the gospel. She came back night after night but she was afraid to respond because of the state of her life.

At last she came and brought her husband with her. They came to Christ together and their marriage was restored. John Hayes had shaken hands with that woman as she walked down the aisle and said, I'm so glad to see you tonight.

[18 : 44] He didn't know who she was until she came into the vestry and said, I want Jesus Christ. At the London Road Baptist Church one evening a man who had come into the inquiry room and found peace with God was worried at the thought of telling his wife.

Meanwhile, in another room a woman was being counseled. Both wondered how they would tell their respective partners about this, the greatest experience of their lives. They needn't have worried. They were husband and wife and they met on the premises before they went home after coming to the meeting separately.

A man was kneeling on the pavement outside the fisherman's Bethel one evening. Douglas Brown saw him and thinking he was in trouble a soul approached him to speak with him. Oh sir, he said, don't disturb me.

I've been praying for my boys for years and the three of them are in the inquiry room. Thank God. Two professional men who were related and well known in the town were converted on successive evenings.

Two women of low repute knelt at the communion rail one night and were heard to cry, oh God, oh God. On another evening a powerful man who had a criminal record and against whom the leaders had been warned came into the church, came into the vestry with the words, I want God and knelt at the communion rail with a little girl of 13 years as each received the saviour.

[19 : 59] The man immediately joined himself with a band of open air preachers and went all over the town confessing Christ as his saviour. He soon brought two of his friends to the meetings who were also led to the Lord.

Douglas Brown and Hugh Ferguson were crossing the harbour bridge late one evening after a meeting when they came across a man who attempted to speak to them broke down, leaned over the railings and wept like a child. He was under deep conviction of sin and felt he was too bad to be saved.

The two ministers took him aside and there on the pavement beside the bridge led him to Christ. The next evening he was first down the aisle as a testimony to his newfound faith. On Good Friday morning a man was loitering on the seafront outside the hotel dining room where Douglas Brown was having breakfast.

The Holy Spirit prompted him to go and speak to the man so he went out and joined him on one of the seats. He remarked on the lovely morning and glorious sea. Yes and what a glorious savour you have was the quick reply.

He was an anxious soul and he was pointed to Christ there on that seat on the seafront. Poor desperate woman whose family had recently died was passing the Baptist church one evening barefooted and hatless she was about to throw herself into the harbour.

[21 : 07] Arrested by the sound of singing she slipped into the back of the church although she found no rest or peace that evening and went away stating her intention of not returning the spirit drew her and the following evening she was again in the congregation and came to Christ.

Snatched from the verge of suicide she became the caretaker of the Baptist church for many years. A builder whose drunken ways created havoc in his home and almost drove his poor afflicted wife to suicide was converted together with his wife.

Afterwards instead of going to the public house the man would push his wife to the services and prayer meetings in a village chair where they would thank God for his mercy and pray for their children who had been affected by the evil influences formerly in their home.

John Hayes commented there have been times when Mr. Ferguson and I have gone alone and sobbed out our hearts together in joy at the great things that God has done for us.

Saturday the 26th of March 1921 a press man who worked for a London newspaper was home on holiday and walking down a Suffolk lane when he heard a voice telling him to take a turning to the right.

[22 : 15] He had not gone far when he met a man carrying a carpet bag walking miserably with his head bowed. The man looked up and recognized the printer saying I saw you at one of the meetings. Yes, I've been to some of the meetings the man replied.

The man with the bag told his story. Eleven years ago I left in disgrace. I've been in South Africa for eight years and have only been back in England a few weeks. I've never been near a house of God and I felt I would just fling myself out of life.

But last Wednesday my wife said to me I'm going to one of the services and I want you to come too. When she said that I took up a book and flung it at her head. Well, she said you can do that what you will but a voice has told me to go and I'm going.

That woman went to the meeting and so did her reluctant and ill-tempered husband. On Saturday the man was wandering down that country lane under conviction of sin. He was soon kneeling in the lane with his new frowned friend and the burden of his sin was lifted.

They went home and later that day the man's wife was converted. The following day the press man wrote to Douglas Brown and told him that at a quarter to nine that evening there would be a little prayer meeting in a wood where a husband and a wife with three friends who had been converted the day before and himself would give thanks for God's good work the miracle of grace.

[23 : 36] What it isn't this is not effective evangelism. This is not effective evangelism. There's plenty of evangelism around today quite a lot of it is not very effective some of it is but this is not effective evangelism.

This is not about techniques this isn't about processes this isn't about programs this isn't about emotionalism either it's always been possible to stir people up to respond in a certain kind of way if it was evening time we could turn down the lights and we could play certain kinds of music again and again and again in a certain kind of way we could get a response from any of us but this isn't about emotionalism this is not revivalism this isn't about putting a placard on the outside of the church and saying in two weeks time we're going to hold a week of revival meetings no the role of man is very very small this isn't about personal renewal as wonderful and as important as it is that each one of us should have a real encounter with

Jesus Christ and fresh encounters with him by his spirit but this is what it is this is a sovereign work of God's spirit producing an unusual awakening of spiritual life among God's people and accompanied by an awesome awareness of God I put Jeremiah 5 22 on the board should you not fear me declares the Lord should you not tremble in my presence one of the remarkable and constant themes of all of these true revivals is a trembling amongst people as they're awestruck by the presence of God God not as a comfortable friend sitting next to you in the seat as a mighty God amazing mighty

God should you not tremble in my presence in Wales in 1859 it was recorded that the house was so full of the divine presence that ungodly men trembled similarly in North Korea in 1907 at Pyongyang we're told that each felt as they entered the church that the room was full of God's presence that night in Pyongyang there was a sense of God's nearness impossible of description during the revival at Lerstoff in England it was said that the atmosphere was charged with the presence of God

on the Isle of Lewis in 1947 the community became alive with an awareness of God's presence and people out on the peat moors would know that God was there amongst them to such an extent the minister to ask for the way of salvation they were aware that God was moving in 1952 on the Isle of Harris we're told that the most outstanding feature was the awe inspiring sense of the presence of God almighty God a deep consciousness of sin and its consequences what God did in Congo Zaire in 1953 was a remarkable work and it was two months before the unbelieving world was touched but those were two terrible months for the pastors missionaries and church members as people were broken by their sense of sinfulness in North Korea in 1907 a missionary describing the revival there wrote as the prayer continued a spirit of heaviness and sorrow for sin came down upon the audience over on one side someone began to weep and in a moment the whole audience was weeping man after man would rise confess his sins break down and weep and then throw himself to the floor and beat the floor with his fist in a perfect agony of conviction he went on to record the terrible consequences that followed a few nights later my last glimpse of the audience is photographed indelibly on my brain some threw themselves on the floor hundreds stood with arms outstretched towards heaven every man forgot each other each was face to face with [28 : 20] God I can hear yet that fearful sound of hundreds of men pleading with God for life for mercy the cry went out over the city until the heathen were in consternation P.S.

oh that God would do something among us today to cause the heathen to tremble a longing to be right with God and live holy lives it's recorded that the work of God at Canberslang in Scotland in 1742 embraced all classes all ages and all moral conditions cursing swearing and drunkenness were given up by those who came under its power the powerful work of the spirit that swept across Kentucky in 1800 left the state entirely changed as one observer noted I found Kentucky as remarkable for sobriety as it had formerly been for dissoluteness and immorality a profane expression was hardly ever heard a religious awe seemed to pervade the country there are similar accounts about the south wales coal mines in the 1904 revival where some of the most blasphemous foul-mouthed men looked after the pit ponies but when the men were converted their ponies could no longer understand their language and stop working in Birmingham during the 1830s it was said of one minister that he left the public houses vocal with grumblers because so few gathered there any more and a deep desire to reach the unsaved

Evan Roberts in 1904 in Wales then a fearful bending of the judgment day came to my mind and I was filled with compassion for those who would bend at the judgment seat and I wept following that the salvation of the human soul was solemnly impressed upon me and I felt ablaze with the desire to go through the length and breadth of Wales to tell of the Saviour and had this been possible I would have been willing to pay God for the privilege of doing so so did Howell Harris gaining Wales when he stated I shall be more satisfied when I am an instrument to bring one soul to the knowledge of Christ than if I got a thousand pounds that would be worth 12 years wages in those days a sovereign work of God's spirit a sovereign work of God's spirit that's entirely in his hands to do so entirely in his hands not to do so producing an unusual awakening of spiritual life among God's people and accompanied by these four characteristics together with a mighty converting work so that many many become Christians so I ask firstly what is our reaction when we hear this doubt or cynicism understandable because we live in a very rationalistic and scientific age where many people will be very happy to explain away the things of God's spirit in terms of chemistry but I hope we're not in that group today I don't think you can really open your Bibles and seriously engage with the word of God and think that such things like this can't be realities there have always been such people who want their religion very nice and controlled and tightly boxed up and in a way in a way just completely in the mind but you can't read the

Bible in that way when God deals with people he deals with them and the whole of their beings maybe you find it very frightening because it's unknown this is unknown territory for most of us I've never seen this have any of you ever seen this how many people in this country have ever seen it so it feels fearful but I hope and I judge for the mixture of responding faces that there is something here which is for our encouragement something which is deeply encouraging why we need to hear these stories because we need reviving do you feel the presence of God so greatly as you get up in the morning as you open your

[33 : 28] Bible as it were he's very dear to you in that room you know the power of God upon you as you seek to win people for Christ do you know what it is to come into this place and to sense the awe of the presence of God so that you could barely do anything apart from sit down and close your

eyes and be close to him do you know what it is to have such a fear of sin that those normal temptation areas of your life well you wouldn't even dread to go anywhere near them well so I could go on I'm just describing how it is for most of us most of us who live in these unrevived times we need reviving it is a truth we need the powerful work of

God upon us because this city and this community in which we are set needs conversion and so we've gone through the generations of people who used to go to church because it was the right thing to do it was a proper thing to do and then people stopped going to church because why bother and then people began to say who cares about church anyhow and then they began to say words against God and lived lives against God without any impunity without any sense of the horror and the wretchedness of that and I think we live in the midst of that we've gone so used to it but this is a city in which we're placed 270,000 people for the most part just like the city of Nineveh we're completely careless about the things of God

God is not in their thoughts certainly not the awesome God who makes heaven and earth how is this city to be converted be a great starting point if something like Lostov 1921 were to occur in Brighton in 2013 because God is greatly glorified when the spirit of God is poured out on any community what should we do we need to live faithfully and feelingly in all things today's message is not a call to go up onto the nearest mountainside ditching beacon and wait there until the Holy Spirit of God falls upon the city it's a call for us to carry on we carry on we serve

God this awesome God this God that we read about we serve him and we seek in all that we do to do so with integrity and that's my one plea really that I would bring to you this morning today please don't live on the margins of spiritual matters don't go through the motions but pray that there would be a reality about God in your life seek to live faithfully and feelingly in all things hear and read these stories to encourage your spirit and happy to loan out books there's plenty written on these matters there we need to hear these stories ask God to do his reviving work amongst us prayer is the one almost universal precursor of revival before the revival came to the isle of Lewis in 1949 there were two ladies in their 80s their names were Peggy and Christine

Smith Peggy was blind and her sister Christine was doubled up with arthritis they couldn't get to church so they prayed at home and as they prayed and asked God to do his reviving work because in the isle of Lewis they'd seen God's reviving work in the past times and they wanted to see it again and as they prayed God said to Peggy and Christine that he was going to revive his work in the isle of Lewis two people weren't even found in a church they were praying for God's mighty work and I think this gives us vast encouragement we cannot manipulate God to do anything like this but we can call out to him and pray that what he has done in times past he would repeat in our days in our time ask God to do his reviving work amongst us prayer is the one almost universal precursor of revival and so it is we can pray so it is we can ask

[39 : 05] God for these things so it is that he can work in this place to by best knowledge there has never been a revival in Brighton never it's hard soil it's a tough place but there's no barrier to God I am utterly confident that what he has done in these places that I've described to you he can certainly do in our day in our time and may God give us grace to have such confidence and hope in him that we might call out to him in our need because we are needy and ask that he would glorify the name of his son Jesus Christ so that not just ones and twos but hundreds and thousands bow the knee to the

Lord Jesus Christ God