

Hindrances to Revival

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

My name is August Fern. Today on Cal Sunday, I'll share that I am a proud Cal grad in engineering, class of a while back. And please forgive my hoarse voice, but I spent yesterday afternoon at Memorial Stadium cheering on the Cal Bears.

So today's scripture reading is from Genesis chapter 26, verses 12 through 18, as printed in the liturgy. Please join me. Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold because the Lord blessed him.

The man became rich and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him.

[1 : 14] So all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the time of his father Abraham, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth. Then Abimelech said to Isaac, move away from us.

You have become too powerful for us. So Isaac moved away from there and encamped in the valley of Gerar, where he settled. Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died.

And he gave them the same names his father had given them. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. So the word for us today is that we must dig down to the living water of God the Father and his son Jesus.

This text encourages us to dig down to the living water of God the Father and his son Jesus. And I want to talk about digging down to the living water because Isaac is in trouble.

He's in a difficult situation. If you go back and read in verse 1, there's a drought that's come to the promised land. And as a result of that drought, there's a famine. And yet despite that famine, the Lord has blessed his people with a hundredfold crop, a hundredfold harvest.

[2 : 32] And because of that, they become the object of envy among the Philistines who've begun to stop up their water supply and forced the people of God to move.

And so Isaac takes his family, takes his wife and his kids, his servants, his animals, his possessions, this large group of people, and they go in search of water. Now, some of us took a pilgrimage to Israel in 2019.

And we experienced personally that this land of promise is exceedingly hot. And there are vast tracts of barrenness.

And you can get quite thirsty. And if you don't have access to water, you're not going to survive for very long. And so Isaac is in this urgent, desperate situation where he needs water, which is absolutely essential for life.

He's seeking something that's fundamental, something that's non-negotiable, without which life cannot be maintained. And what I've come to see is that this is the position of the church in the third millennium, that we are in a spiritual drought, and that we have this urgent need for life.

[3 : 47] Jesus talked to us last week from the Gospel of Mark about the need, our need, for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to come to us through prayer to bring vitality and to bring strength into every activity of the life of his church.

Now, hear these words of Jesus from John, the Gospel of John chapter 4. He says, Jesus goes on in John chapter 7.

He stood up and he cried out before the crowds. He said, Christchurch, the question for us is, are we thirsty?

Are we thirsty for God? Are we thirsty for that water without which we are dead? Do we have a burning desire to drink from this spring of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit?

Well, what does Isaac do when he's confronted with his need for water, with the thirst of his people? He knows that if he can't find water soon, all of them are going to perish.

[5 : 10] Life itself is going to come to an end. And so he makes three crucial decisions. Notice, first of all, what he does not do. He does not go in search of a place with great views, a place with great comfort, a place with great entertainment.

This is an urgent situation and he does not rely on himself. He doesn't rely on other people. He doesn't say, oh, we need water. So he just starts randomly digging down in the dirt. He doesn't call in the experts and say, come find us a new supply of water.

Rather, he says, no, the situation is so dire, we don't have time for any of that. We can't rely on ourselves. That's decision number one. Decision number two is Isaac remembers the covenant of God.

He says, you know, if we don't have water and have it quickly, then all of my people are going to perish and I'm going to die right along with them. And boom, he has this memory of God's covenant promises to Abraham.

And he says, you know, my father lived here. And God blessed him to find water wherever he went and enabled him to dig wells and get down to this abundant supply of water.

[6 : 28] And if our covenant God provided for us then and there and gave us wells and gave us water, then surely he'll do it again. He'll do it again if only we'll come back to the places where he's ordained to give us life.

So he says to his people, come on, let's go to that place of guaranteed supply. Let's go find that vital source that will enable us to live.

And we read in verse 18, Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died. And he gave them the same names that his father had given them.

He says, let's not dig our own wells. Let's drink the water that Abraham drank. Let's go back to the wells of God's covenant to these places. He provided for our father and for our mother.

And church, what I'm realizing is that we too need to go back to the past. We need to go look in the places in history, the history of our scriptures, the history of the church where God's people were full of life and full of vigor, where we see the church is full of the power of the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 46] And we need to say, where are these wells of living water that God has given to quench our thirst? We are in such need of life and power.

And we need to remember that every instance of revival is really a return to a well, a return to a series of wells that have been discovered before.

If we want that life, if we want that power, if we want that water without which we cannot exist, God has, in fact, revealed that there's a water supply available to us if only we would go.

And this is where Isaac makes his third crucial decision. He says, let's not rely on ourselves. Let's remember God's covenant. And then he says, let's deal with all the junk that's clogging up the wells. You see, there's a problem when he arrives with his thirsty people. He found that the Philistines had stopped up the wells. He went back to those old wells and the water was still there deep down, but they could not see it.

[8 : 54] The water wasn't available to them. There it is, down in the depths, this life-giving supply of water, and yet here we are, this thirsty people in desperate need, and we can't get to it.

What has gone wrong? Why can we not drink the water? Why can't we put our buckets down and draw it up? Why can't we get a hold of it?

And the answer is because the Philistines had stopped up the wells. They filled it up with earth so that although the water's there, it's not available to drink.

And it says in verse 18 that Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham had died.

You see, just as Isaac had to deal with the work of the Philistines, so the church today needs to deal with the work of those who've stopped up our wells of living water with dirt and with rocks.

[9 : 55] Every time the church has found herself in a position of lifelessness, where it feels like her life is ebbing away and lacking in spiritual vitality and power, it's because of this cluttering up of our wells of vital, essential truth.

Somebody, some group has blocked up and choked up our drinking supply by putting things between the people of God and the truth of God.

And they've thrown in all kinds of material that lies between the people in our desperate need and that supply of water that's just there waiting for us down at the bottom.

And emulating this example of Isaac, we need to return to the wells of our fathers and mothers in the faith who had the living water of the Holy Spirit, and we need to clear out the dirt and the rocks of the Philistines so that we can drink once again this ancient supply of the water of God, the power and life of the Holy Spirit.

We've got to dig down to the living water. And we've got to dig down to the living water of God the Father. It's a necessary preliminary step in revival to deal with the work of the Philistines, to just clear out from the church whatever's been stopping it up, right?

[11 : 30] To dig down and to rediscover these glorious and central truths, these doctrines, these fundamental articles of our faith that consistently show up in pretty much every revival that you can read about in history.

And one of those we see is that the church in revival has dug down to the truth in this living water of what sort of being God is. And she's discovered there the truth that God is a sovereign God.

And God is a transcendent and a living God who acts and who intervenes and who comes and erupts into and interferes in the life of His church and the individuals in His church.

You see, we will not seek God. We will not pray to God. We will not ask God to revive us unless we believe that this is the sort of God He is and this is the kind of things that He does.

And one of the ideas that has crept into the church of late is this idea called moralistic therapeutic deism. Anyone heard of this?

[12 : 40] Moralistic therapeutic deism. M-T-D, right? And deism is this idea that God exists but He's not particularly involved. He's remote and He's distant.

And what's interesting is that before the great awakening of the 18th century that we associate with people like George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley, the church of that age had also fallen into deism, this false image of God who's merely a creator that kind of got everything going but He's not actively involved in our lives.

He's not actively involved in the church. At that time and in our time, God has been remade into this distant and uncaring being for whom we have no expectation that He will break through, that He will act in response to our prayer because we banished Him, right?

We banished Him out into His own eternity. The church so easily falls into this error as well as its opposite error of pantheism that says, well, God is in everything.

God is in you. God is in me. God is in this. God is in that. And so we never really expect God to act from the outside. We never call upon Him and say, God, come down and reveal your mighty hand and your outstretched arm.

[14 : 04] But in times of revival, people come in and they say, no, we've got to recover this truth, this living water that God is a transcendent God above us. He's sovereign and He's supreme.

He's great and He's glorious. But He's also an imminent God who's close to us, who's near to us, who's right there full of mercy for us.

If we just call out His name, He is so ready to revive us. In fact, He's more ready to revive the church than the church is to be revived.

And the church in revival has dug down to the living water of this truth about who God really is. But also the church in revival has dug down to the truth of God's special revelation.

Revival has only ever come to the church when she has rediscovered that the Bible is the unique authoritative self-expression and self-revelation of God.

[15 : 07] And we could say that the state of the church in our society today is due almost entirely to the voluntary departure from belief in the Bible as the fully inspired Word of God.

One Old Testament scholar, he goes through the various revivals. There's about ten revivals that are recounted for us in the Old Testament. And he notices all the marks and the characteristics of those revivals.

And he says, number one, they always follow a time of great spiritual decline. And number two, they always happen when God gets a hold of one person or a few people among His leaders and then revival comes to the rest of the church.

And number three, he says those revivals always, always involve a restoration of holy Scripture among God's people. I think immediately of King Josiah.

Somehow, the book of Deuteronomy, the capstone of the Torah, had become lost. And he, as a result, had never heard this Word of God.

[16:15] And under his reign, they rediscovered this book of the Bible. And when he heard it read for the first time, he heard this Word of God about the love that God has for His people and about the great love that we are to have for Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

You know what he did? He tore his robe. And he wept bitter tears. And he got off his throne and threw himself down on the ground. And he said, oh, oh, we have not been obeying these words. And so what did he do next? He created an opportunity for the reading of God's Word to be reconstituted among the people of God. And when they heard God's Word, a great revival broke out in Israel.

And so the question for us is, how can we be revived if the Word of God breathed out by the Spirit of God is being ignored by us?

You know, why would we hope that God would fill us with the Spirit with which He inspired His very Scriptures? Why would He want to fill us with that Spirit if we say of those Scriptures, no thanks?

[17:33] Or, yes, I'll take this part that I like and that agrees with me and my philosophy, and I'll just kind of let that other stuff go. Why would He fill us with His Spirit if that's our attitude toward His Spirit-inspired Word?

And if that's you, I want to encourage you, do something different. You know, get home today and open the New Testament. Open the letter of the Ephesians, of the Philippians, and read God's Word.

And make it a practice in your daily life. Church and revival has dug down to the living water of who God is and what He said about Himself and His special revelation in His Scriptures.

But they've also dug down to this truth, this living water, that humanity is in sin and under the wrath of God. Almost every revival, they've gotten down to this truth.

And we say, ouch, that's not something we like very much. It feels incompatible with the doctrine of a God as love.

[18:43] But no one has preached the love of God more than Jesus Christ. And this is what Jesus taught us about the human condition. He says in Mark 7, For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come.

Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

All these evils come from inside and defile a person. Jesus would say, yes, you were originally good, but none of you are inherently good.

Humanity is in sin. And Jesus also preached that we're under the wrath of God. This great preacher of the love of God, He says in Matthew 13, He says, Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.

The Son of Man will send His angels and they will gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and lawbreakers and throw them into the fiery furnace. And in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[19:50] The wrath of God is the fire of His love. It's the fire of His love that burns against the evil that's destroying and distorting His beloved creation.

And particularly the image of God that He set in human beings, God burns against anything that's destroying that. You know, when we moved into this building in 2010, we had it painted.

It needed a paint job. And unfortunately, the company that we hired, they just came in and painted it. And when they did that, they painted over the rot. Right?

There was rot in the stucco. There was rot in the wood. And they just said, well, we're going to paint over that and sort of pretend it doesn't exist. And guess what? Twelve years later, it's gotten worse.

And so now we're painting the church again and paying twice the amount of money because we ignored the rot that was there.

And this is what happens in moralistic, therapeutic deism. This is how it works. We say, you know, I'm a good person who more or less lives up to my own ideals.

[21 : 00] I have occasional lapses. I have minor flaws. I have slight character deficiencies. But I'm not that alarmed because I'm better than most people. I'm better than you. And this God who's distant and this God who's indifferent, he really is there.

He exists to reward me by accepting me and acknowledging my inherent goodness and making me happy forever. And the church, when the church is revived, it really moves so far away from that vision to a more serious and sober-minded view of the holiness of God and the justice of God. And there's so many examples of this from the great revival in Korea in 1907. But this is one that comes out of Glasgow, Scotland in 1742.

One observer of that revival saw that he said, I found a good many persons under the deepest exercise of soul, crying out most bitterly of their lost and miserable state by reason of sin, of their unbelief in despising Christ and the offers of the gospel, of the hardness of their heart, and of their gross carelessness and indifference toward God.

Not so much from fear of punishment as from a sense of the dishonor done to God. The church, when it's being revived, it learns how to dig down to this living water of truth about God the Father.

[22 : 35] But also, the church digs down to this living water, not just of God the Father, but of his son, Jesus. It says in verse 18 that Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died.

And, you know, when we return to the wells that God has given to our fathers and mothers in the faith, and if we're finding any evidence in our lives of the work of the Philistines, we need to clear it out.

If we're going to drink of God's abundant supply of water and live and have life among ourselves.

And just as this church in revival has always cleared out the dirt and the rocks, these erroneous and low beliefs about God and about his word and about his holiness and his justice, the church in revival has also dug out these sub-biblical beliefs about Jesus.

Because the work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus. That's what Jesus said. The Holy Spirit will come and glorify me. And so anything that causes us to have a low view of Jesus is grieving the Holy Spirit.

And it's quenching the Holy Spirit's work among us. And the church in revival has dug down to the truth and the living water about the person of Jesus.

[24 : 04] Some of us are here, we're exploring Christianity for the first time. And it's an honor, it's a delight to be a part of that journey with you. But we'd be doing you a great disservice.

We'd be failing you, really, if we told you that Jesus is just a social reformer. He's just a political agitator. He's just an exemplar of ethical living and teaching.

Now the church in revival confesses that Jesus is in fact the eternal word of God that made the world and who made you. And that Jesus is this exalted king who's ruling the world and who's ruling over you.

You see, before revival came in 1859 to the Presbyterian Church of Northern Ireland, that church had gone astray like many churches do. And it began to espouse this belief called Arianism that denied the eternity and the divinity of Jesus.

And it wasn't until that church got rid of that error and saw the full truth of who Jesus actually is, that the mighty blessing of the Holy Spirit came down upon that church and changed not only the church, it changed the society.

[25 : 24] Because she began to say, you know what, it's from Jesus. And through Jesus and to Jesus are all things. And he's the God who was and who is and who is to come.

The church in revival has dug down to that living water the truth about the person of Jesus, but also she's dug down to the truth and that living water about the work of Jesus.

And the centerpiece of Jesus' work is his atoning death. And we really have no right to look for revival until we can say with the Apostle Paul that, in 1 Corinthians 2, I resolve to know nothing.

I resolve to know nothing except Christ and him crucified. Why does the church in revival so glory in the cross and rejoice and boast and sing songs about the blood of Jesus of all things?

Well, the reason is, that's the heart of our gospel. Romans chapter 5, verses 8 and 9 says, For God demonstrated his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[26 : 41] Therefore, since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him?

Jesus is not merely a peacemaker who's crushed by a violent empire, though that is true. And Jesus is not merely an exemplar of sacrificial suffering love, though that also is true. But our gospel is that the cross is the point at which this holy and just God laid upon Jesus the iniquity of us all.

That that is the place where he visited the judgment of our sins, of my sins, upon his eternal and beloved Son. And the church in revival has this profound experience that not only has this redemption happened objectively in Jesus, but it's happened subjectively in my life, in me, through the Holy Spirit.

This is what happened to Martin Luther, right? When he suddenly saw the truth of justification by God's grace alone, and that all the goodness we bring to God, all the righteousness we bring to God is just filthy rags.

[28 : 01] It was when he came to see that truth, that revival came, that it prepared the way for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church in the 1500s.

The same is true with this truth of regeneration, when the church has seen that, you know, no one can just decide to become a Christian. No one can just decide, oh, I want to know God.

No, it's when the church realizes that unless the Holy Spirit of God comes down, unless he comes and he does this work deep down inside, to do what Jesus described as making us be born again from above, causing us to become new creatures with new power and a new outlook on life, there's no hope for anyone to be saved.

That is the point at which the church begins to cry out, oh, Holy Spirit, come and do your work among us.

Church, we've got to dig down to these living waters of God the Father and his Son, Jesus, because when these wells get choked up, it produces a severe spiritual drought, and that's really what we're living through.

[29 : 21] We've been living through it. It's going to keep going. Unless some of us say, gosh, you know, I'm really thirsty for God. Are you burning with a desire to know God, to experience God, to be touched by the power of God?

If that's you, then I want to encourage you, seek out these living waters of revival. Dig down to those places we know God has ordained his blessing.

Let us, like Isaac, open up the wells of truth, open up these doctrines, open up these fundamental articles of our faith that are essential for life.

And let's remember Jesus who stood up and he cried out, if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.

Now, he said this about the Spirit of God. I'll close with this prayer that really launched the revival of 1904, that changed the 20th century.

[30 : 38] And this prayer is simply this, oh Lord, send the Holy Spirit now. For Jesus Christ's sake. Oh Lord, send the Holy Spirit now.

For Jesus Christ's sake. Oh Lord, send the Holy Spirit now. For Jesus Christ's sake.
Amen.κ■