

Revival! (the first few minutes of the sermon are missing - sorry!)

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[0 : 00] traditionalism, cultural snobbery. I clearly remember being told by a free church elder in this presbytery that he would rather his church close its doors than that anything about it should change. He had his wish. The church of which he was an elder is now closed, but in truth it was dead a long time before those doors closed. It's just he didn't know it.

We clamor for changes in the church and no doubt there are certain things about us which do need to change, but the greatest change required is a new movement of the Holy Spirit and his power among us. How many times have sermons here lacked what Spurgeon calls go? Have they lacked go? Blame me as much as you like. You're welcome. But the ultimate problem is that the Holy Spirit has not self-evidently owned the proclamation of the Word and accompanied it with his power.

At other times, relatively poor sermons, well technically speaking anyway, have been filled with the power of the Spirit and people have come to a living faith in Christ here in these pews. Whoever you are, you're free to come to me or to one of the other elders to talk about changes you would like to see. But whoever you are, make sure that before you come to speak to us, you've spoken to God, that you have pled with him to send forth his Spirit upon the mission of our church.

Because programs will not spark genuine revival, but prayer will. Planning will not invite the Holy Spirit to work in you power among us, but piety will. The greatest need of our church is for God to revive his work in the midst of these years, for him to send his Spirit to blow on these dry bones and bring them to life, for there to be genuine conversions among us. And those who were backsliding brought back to a living, vibrant faith in Jesus. So let me ask you another serious question.

Are you regularly praying for the renewal and revival of the church? That this church may never be described the way Spurgeon described his, as a ghastly crew, the crew of the ancient mariner. Revival in the life of the Christian and the life of the church.

[2 : 46] We must devote ourselves to earnestly pray for God to revive his work in the midst of these years. However, ultimately, we're not praying for the revival of the Christian, nor even of the church.

We're praying for the revival of the gospel. Our highest desire is not for our own personal well-being, not even the prosperity of the church, but the power of the gospel. It's the gospel of Christ which is our highest concern, that gospel brought into disrepute by the ghastly crew which makes up his church. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray for a new day of gospel power, where the word that's preached would be sharp and effective, and the word lived would be contagious and mighty. Let's pray and pray and pray more. Prayer for life. A prayer for mercy, secondly. A prayer for mercy.

This verse, Habakkuk 3.2, contains some of the most poignant words in the Bible, certainly one of the most meaningful, meaning-filled prayer anywhere. Lord, in your wrath, remember mercy. In your wrath, remember mercy. Now, the word wrath here has a wide variety of meanings and is commonly translated in the Old Testament as turmoil or trouble. We could just as easily translate this prayer as, Lord, in troubled days for us, remember mercy. In troubled days for us, remember mercy. And these two ideas are not altogether different because sometimes the days in which we live can be troubled because we're experiencing the anger of God against his church. Well, sometimes. It is not so much the trouble of the church and the turmoils that we pass through, which I want us to focus on, but Habakkuk's direct prayer to God. Lord, remember mercy.

The word he uses carries the idea of the tenderness of a mother's pity toward her hurting child, what was once called bowels of mercies. This is to whom Habakkuk prays for revival, not a distant, vengeful deity somewhere up there, but to a heavenly Father who tenderly loves his people and who longs to show them mercy, to lift his hand of discipline from them and to restore to them the experience of his joy and his blessing. Now, Habakkuk had good reason to pray these words. He is prophesying to a people who, on account of their sin, are to endure unimaginable suffering and captivity in Babylon. Spurgeon was writing in the 1870s, but in his sermon, he speaks powerfully about the weakness of the church in his day.

We tend to think, don't we, of the Victorian times as days of paradise for the church. It was not so. For though many more people may have attended church than attend church today, the churches many attended were unorthodox theologically and spiritually dead. For that reason, Spurgeon urged his people to pray for God's mercy. And we have no less reason to pray for God's mercy today. The church in Scotland has rarely been weaker than it is. Although half of Scotland's population claims to be Christian, less than a tenth of that half regularly attend any church on a Sunday, and of those who do, many attend churches where the gospel is not preached at all.

[7 : 00] Religious diversity is celebrated. To be of no religion is the most popular status of all. 15 years ago, Professor Donald MacLeod preached a memorable series of lectures in this church on the topic of the Great Commission, where he lamented the fact that so few people from other religions are becoming Christians in Scotland today. Nothing has changed in the last 15 years, including that the number of regular church attenders is still in decline.

What then is our instinctive solution to this problem? Is it to make new plans, devise new strategies? Is it to set up Quango committees, rebrand ourselves into a new centralized politburo made up of mission gurus? Or is it to fall to our knees in humble repentance, recognizing that the reason God's hand of blessing has been lifted from the Scottish church is not because of our lack of expertise, but our lack of holiness. Not because of our lack of resources, but our lack of repentance.

Not because we have relied too much on the sovereignty of God, but too little. Again, I'm not decrying the plans and the strategies and the mission committees we set up, but the question I'm asking is this, what is our instinctive solution to the problem of the weakness of the church? Habakkuk's instinctive reaction to the trouble he and his nation was facing was to turn to God and to plead for mercy.

Now, as you know, for God to show us mercy is not to give us what we deserve. Not to give us what we deserve. On account of our spiritual deadness and apathy, we deserve for God to leave us where we are today. The church becoming more and more of a ghastly crew. The preaching of the word to have less and less go and our own spiritual lives as individual Christians to be increasingly joyless and powerless.

Our instinctive solution must not be to try and reverse the trend and win God's blessing with our superior planning, but with our praying. Not with our strategies, but with our supplications.

[9 : 44] Not with our management, but with his mercy. Do you not mishear me? Planning, strategies, and management are important, and without them, our faith turns to the quietism of the Quaker. God uses means to accomplish his mission purposes, and these are important means. But first of all, before we gather together to present our abilities to God, we gather together all our sins and repent over them before God, praying for his mercy to revive us again. It's mercy from heaven we need. It's a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It's power upon us as individual Christians and as the church, so that the proclamation of the word has go in it. The service of the church has power in it. The worship of God has joy in it.

The fellowship of the saints has love in it. And the evangelism of the Christian church in Scotland becomes attractive to the world around it. Our prayer is, Lord, purge the world from within us, that we may love the world around us. Lord, grant us repentance and show us your mercy.

In your wrath, Lord, remember mercy. Are there any here who think they do not need God's mercy?

That they're good enough to meet with God on an equal footing and that they have nothing of which to be ashamed before him? Anyone? I'm not speaking here to those who are not yet Christians. I'm speaking to those who are. For I fear that having been saved by the mercy of God, we have forgotten that we still need fresh mercy every day from him. We're so busy talking about the rewards we shall receive in heaven that we've forgotten our most basic need of all, repentance and mercy from God.

How often, in essence, have we prayed, Lord, you're happy with me because of who I am, rather than praying, Lord, you're happy with me despite who I am, but because of Jesus and his cross.

[12 : 14] Father, save us from self-reliance and ourselves. In wrath, remember mercy. Prayer for mercy. Prayer for life. Prayer for mercy. And then thirdly and finally, a prayer for unity. A prayer for unity. I want us to notice one last feature of this prayer. Namely, it is entirely devoid of a partisan spirit. Listen again. Oh, Lord, I have heard the report of you and your work, Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years, revive it. In the midst of the years, make it known. In wrath, remember mercy. It's God's work Habakkuk is praying to be revived.

It's God's work Habakkuk is praying to be made known. It's not the work of any one particular group, any one denomination, not one specific church, not one specific brand within Judaism. It is entirely focused on God and His work. In other words, to pray for genuine revival is to have an ecumenical spirit in the best sense of the word. For God in His mercy may choose not to revive His work in Scotland using the Free Church of Scotland or any Presbyterian church in Scotland. In fact, He may choose to use a denomination or a grouping that we may not immediately favor. He may choose to fill their preachers with the goal of which Spurgeon speaks. He may choose to fill their people with spiritual strength.

He may choose to bless their witness and fill their congregations with eager worshipers. At the same time, we may continue to experience that sense of being a ghastly crew.

What though shall be our response? Rather than responding with jealousy and pouring cold water on God's work, we shall rejoice with those who rejoice and we shall put our shoulder to the plow in the work of the gospel with them while all the time praying that what God has done for them, He will do for us also.

Perhaps this unity in and of itself is a fruit of revival. No, perhaps it most definitely will be a fruit of revival. But denominational barriers would prove no obstacle to the Holy Spirit of reviving His work in the church in our land. And if somehow we should think that the Free Church of Scotland is the only church through which God can work because of our faithfulness or our superior strategies, we need to go back to the second point of our sermon and repent of our denominational pride, recognizing that if God will use us in any way to revive His work in Scotland, it shall not be because we earn the right, but because He delights to show mercy.

[15 : 29] I maintain that our greatest need as individual Christians, as a church, and as the church in Scotland, is a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit's power and love. Not more money, but more mourning over sin. Not more planning, but more prayer. Not more strategies, but more supplication.

Not more reviews, but more repentance. Not more campaigns, but more holiness. Not more professionalism, but more gospel humility.

We always say that Glasgow City Free Church is a family we belong to, not a building we come to. Will we then, as the family of believers known as Glasgow City Free Church, pray the most ambitious of prayers, which if God should answer, it shall knock us off our feet in amazement?

Will we commit ourselves to the two and a half thousand year old prayer of an obscure Hebrew poet Lord, in the midst of the years, revive your work. In the midst of the years, make your work known.

In wrath, remember mercy.