

Why Revival Matters

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[0 : 0 0] That hymn, it gets me every time just how good it is. I mean, Ian always chooses good hymns and plays them well with good theology, but the theology in that one that we've just sung is just incredible. You can just see it in every line. It's wonderful. 1 Corinthians 10 is where we are this evening, and the first six verses. A short reading, I know, but hopefully a profitable one for us. So the first six verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 10. Now hear God's word. I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, most of them, God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did. Well, may God bless that reading to us, and a short one, easy to imagine what's going on there, a reflection on the past, and we'll come back to the message of that after we've sung together this next hymn. Thank you.

As we consider the reading this evening, it would almost be worthwhile reflecting on what we focused on last week on last week on that why creation matters. In Genesis chapter 1, it's very clear that God created the heavens and the earth. But the way God is referenced, Elohim, is quite different when you get into chapter 2, when he is referenced as Yahweh Elohim. That word Lord indicates that God has moved into relationship with his people. That's really important for a number of different reasons.

One of those reasons is, is that you now have to begin to understand how a relationship with God works, and that's what we're focusing on this evening. You know, if you were to ask the question, why does revival matter? You might come up with quite a lot of different answers, as well as people's genuine interest in wanting revival to happen.

Perhaps in their lifetime, perhaps into a personal situation, or a global situation, or a local situation, wherever it may be. But what I want to point out, which is what Paul is pointing out here in Corinthians, is that revival is not all that elusive as you might think. In fact, it's fairly easy to be explained.

And so there are a couple of things here, which I would very much like us to have a look at, but I want us to have a look at it under the pattern that we see here. In 1 Corinthians 10, it's very clear that Paul is getting the Corinthian church to look back on the people of God, who went round in circles for 40 years. Okay, what does that have to do with us?

[4 : 0 9] If you're a Christian who's experienced God teaching you the same lesson more than once, there you have it. If you're a Christian who's been in this church long enough to see the same thing come around again, but just in a different form, you just see that cycle, well, we've been here before. Okay, it's a different pastor. A few phases are a little bit different, but the situation is almost exactly the same. And many of you, politely saying, have been around long enough to be able to see those kind of patterns. My question is, is why do they happen?

Why the cycle? And is there a good biblical reason and understanding for why those cycles exist? And more importantly, why do they have to exist? Why can't we move on with God instead of coming back to the same thing perhaps five years later, 10 years later, 15 years later? And it's just the same thing, just different faces. And pastors know very well, I think of Robert Murray McShane, who died very young. And in many ways, you're kind of pleased that God took him by grace, of course, because he went into a church, left it, and revival broke out. He went into another church and left it and revival broke out in that church. And I'd be pretty depressed after leaving two churches and revival breaking out when I'm... It would have been nice, Lord, just to have one, you know, or two. But by God's grace, for whatever reason, the Lord took him. You know, we all live in a season and we all get to enjoy things in that season that others don't get to enjoy because they're not around. Same with pastors.

Some pastors come into churches at the height, some come in at the low, some come in on the way up, some come in on the way down. And sometimes we can attribute that up and down, around, back and forth to the pastor at the time. He might have something to do with it. He may have nothing to do with it. Why? Because in this reading, Paul is getting the Corinthian church to look at God's people of old to say, you're no different. You're in the same... Okay, you're a different group of people, you're in a different part of the land. But the same thing's happening. So look back and learn.

In other words, sometimes we expect change to always be in the future or the lessons of change to be in the future when actually they're in the past. And this is what 1 Corinthians 10 is kind of doing or what Paul is doing with the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 10. So what if I said to you this evening that revival can be likened to perhaps a bad marriage being restored, more than 3,000 people being converted? What if a biblical understanding of revival is closer to a marriage being restored than it is 100, 200, or as I said, 3,000 people being converted? What if our understanding of revival is actually not a biblical understanding? We all want revival. And what I think we're saying when we say we all want revival is we want lots and lots of people to go from death to life in Christ Jesus.

We want them to be converted. But if you think about the word revival, it has that revolution sound to it, that cycle to it, that something can only be revived if it existed in the first place.

[8 : 02] So when we think of God's people being revived, in many ways what we should be thinking about, at least in the biblical context, is that people who've had a tremendous relationship with the Lord that is somehow gone sour, that is somehow gone bad, and now there needs to be a biblical revival, it needs to come back around, and these people need to get back into a fresh relationship with God.

Okay, you want 3,000 people to be saved in Scotland, 10,000, the whole of Edinburgh, great. And no one would ever knock that. But I think the biblical terminology for something like that would be conversion, not necessarily revival. If you look at all the instances, if you ever read books on revival, what do you find? What about the Hebridean revival? Started with a few women humbly on their knees before God in prayer. Not unbelievers, but Christian women.

The Welsh revival, same kind of humility, few Christians, okay, and it breaking out. Okay, there's other examples to be given and other explanations, but generally speaking, it begins with that restoration of relationship. Okay, where are we going then? Well, here's the summary of what Paul has to say to the Corinthian church, and therefore it's being said to us.

You'll notice in verses 1 through to 6, Paul is getting the Christians to reflect on the past, on a past that they will know about, but they won't know any of the people in the past.

They won't know any of God's people that wandered around in the wilderness anymore from Adam. It was too long ago for them. But they will remember that God's people through history, through the Bible, did wander around in the wilderness. And Paul is saying, I want you to look back onto God's people and take that as an example of where you are. There's lessons to be learned here, and those lessons can either mean that you can enter into God's blessing, or you too can wander around in a cycle which is not something that he would want them to do. So verse 1, don't be unaware. Don't be unaware of what happened in the past. Then he goes on to say that the spiritual food that they received in the past is the same spiritual food that you received today, namely Christ. Now, of course, we are not to imagine a rock rolling behind the people of God throughout the wilderness. Okay, that's not what

[10 : 35] Paul is speaking about here. He's speaking, he's using a picture. You're not meant to take this rock literally, in the sense that it was a literal rock rolling around, but you are meant to take it truthfully that the people of God in the past were fed by Christ. Christ was their spiritual food.

Christ was the one who kept them strong. But then it says that God was not pleased with most of them, and therefore they were overthrown in the wilderness. Paul then goes to the present generation and says, now, these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

Okay, what's Paul saying in verse 6? This is our attention really, verse 6. He's saying there is a way to learn from the past, and one of the ways that God expects his people to learn is actually from the past. I've used this illustration before. I think it's a fair one. How do you know that fire burns?

Okay, it seems like a fairly easy question, doesn't it, until you actually begin thinking about it. Do you know because you've been told? And then if you've only been told, do you really know?

I don't want to get philosophical, but you can understand that a simple question can actually probe as to what you know and why you know it. Do you know it because you know it to be true convictionally? Do you know it simply because you've been told it, but you're not sure yourself?

[12 : 15] Or do you know it because you've actually experienced it? And of course, God wants us to learn from the past so that we may avoid many experiences. You know, you can get some parents who will say they won't know it until they go through it themselves. Well, you need to listen to God. God doesn't want you to go through it themselves. You know, God expects one generation to prevent the next generation from the same mistakes that their previous generation made. That's learning. That's moving ahead. That's not going around in the circle. And yet too often, as we see here in Corinthians, not much changes. This cycle of happens. It seems because people, God's people, perhaps don't learn from the past as much as they should. Now, we all know that if we listen to someone who knows what they're talking about, you know, perhaps we can get a bit of a head start. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. We don't have to find out for ourselves. We can say, okay, I'll take what you know, and I'll move with it. And here it is to be true. But it's more important that we learn those things so that we don't commit the same errors. That's Paul's point in verse six. His point is, these are examples so that you don't desire evil as they did. In other words, there's lots to learn here, but the main lesson I'm trying to get across to you is don't make the same mistake. That's the lesson

I want you, the church, to pick up on. So God's people in the past wandered through the wilderness for 40 years because they didn't do what God asked them to do. They didn't live by faith.

They didn't trust him. They grumbled at his ways and his means, and God dealt with them by letting them go around in circles. So they went around and around, as it were, for 40 years when they could have entered into the promised land in a matter of days, really. So why the cycle? Why do cycles happen? That's the question, isn't it? Why is there a cycle in the church? Why is there a cycle with God's people throughout the years? Well, is it possible, is it possible for a church to be on the verge of blessing, like God's people entering into the promised land, and then go right by it?

If you're saying yes, here's my question to you. Do you know why you go right by it? And the answers may not be what you think they are. God's people missed entering the promised land by walking right by it. The entrance was open. The doors were open. There you go. Go in and take it. It's yours for the taking. And I've made sure that when you go in, everything is growing. It's a land flowing with milk and honey. Simply go in and get what I have to give to you. And God's people effectively said, we can't do that. There's big people there. Here's God who's brought them out of Egypt.

Okay. Here's God who's brought them out of slavery and bondage. And now they're scared of a few big people. What it is essentially is that they don't want to do it God's way.

[15 : 56] And that's why they missed the entry to blessing. And that's why the cycle began. Wilderness wandering began not because they never arrived at the gate of blessing. It's not because they never arrived at the open door to the land flowing with milk and honey. No, they arrived at it.

They were on its doorstep. But they never entered. And so they went and bypassed it time after time, in many ways, because of their, simply put, lack of faith in what God was telling them to do.

So it seems very, very clear that a church can go around in cycles. And if you've been in this church long enough, you would have seen some of those cycles to know that the reason they happen is down to a few different things. But one thing most importantly is that there's no learning from the past. No learning from the past. We're back at the same place we were 20 years ago. And we're doing the same things again as we did 20 years ago. And no one's considered a thought that if we're doing the same things as we did 20 years ago and it didn't work out then, why is it going to be any different now? I mean, that seems fairly sensible. And yet God's people, through their lack of faith and lack of biblical knowledge, wander and go around in cycles both personally and as a church.

One of the benefits that we have here is that Francis, being a Hebrew professor, allows me to pick up on things that I would never automatically pick up on myself, even though I've read the Bible.

You know, there's something, all right, I never thought about it that way. He points out in Numbers, there's a whole section from chapter 12 onwards to about 21, where God stops challenging his people.

[18 : 03] No commands, no challenges, and just steps back. Now, for those of us who've read Hebrews know that that is a frightening position to be in, as a Christian and as a church. And in Romans 1, it spells out why. Because how does God demonstrate his fatherhood to his people? In Hebrews, how does he do it? Well, he challenges them. He says, now, son, you can't be doing that. Now, daughter, you can't be doing that. I'm going to have to pull you up there because you belong to me. And God likens this to a father disciplining his son. And the reason he disciplines his son and not the neighbor's kids is because his own child is his own child. The relationship is there. And so a father disciplines his son because of the relationship, not because of a lack of relationship. The father doesn't discipline the child who lives three doors up the road because he's not his son. There's no relationship there in which that challenge and that correction comes. And so for God in numbers to step back and not to challenge his people, that's not a comforting thing at all. And yet how many Christians believe that I must be all right before God because I feel no conviction, that I must be all right before God because I feel no challenge. That's not a sign of comfort. That's actually quite a worrying sign. And so here we have God's people wandering around and God just takes his hands off. He gives them a few laws, but as Francis points out, they were laws that could have been given to his people at any time. They wouldn't make any difference whether they were given at that point in their history or 10 years earlier or five years later. It wouldn't make a great deal of difference. But the fact that God no longer corrected his people, that was an issue.

Why? Here's why. Have you ever had a child or even an adult where you're trying to get through to them and you're trying to teach them? And then you say, I'm going to stop.

And your next words are, until you're ready to learn. Until you're ready to learn. Until you develop a heart for learning. Until you develop a mind and a head for learning. I'm going to stop.

Because until you're at that point, I can't begin again with you. Now the reason I know that to be true, because it was said to me often. I can remember my granddad saying to my mum, take him home. Just take him home. I don't know what to do with him. You know, the first son, you know, the first boy in the family, as it were. Yeah, we're all like it, aren't we? But the point to be made is this. You're going to go around in circles. And the reason you're going to go around in circles is because just like a parent, a human parent, God says, until you have a humble heart, until you're in the position where you're going to learn, I can't do anything with you.

And so God steps back. And so one of the reasons why God's people go around in circles so many times, and one of the reasons why churches go around in the cycle that they do, is because it takes a long time for God's people to change. But more importantly, in the same way with a child who does something wrong and doesn't listen, you don't go five minutes after, okay, we'll forget about everything that happened. Now I'll bless you. No, you know well enough as parents that there's, no, you're going to have to pay your dues again, I'm afraid. You're going to have to let a bit of time happen between the blessing that you could have had before you received the blessing that you was going to have. What do you think God's doing? And where do you think parents get those ideas in the first place? God wants to bless his people. God wants to revive his people. God wants to bring his people into the land of blessing, the land flowing with milk and honey. But it's the people who bypass the entry gate. It's the people who don't go in. It's the people who cause themselves to move around in a cycle. Okay, what does that mean? Well, verse six, I think, is very telling.

[22 : 44] When Paul says, let these things, or these things that took place, as examples for us, he's obviously expecting us to learn from them. But it's more than that. He wants us to have a level of discernment. So here's a question. Is it possible for an individual to notice where they are in the cycle? Is it possible for an individual to notice where the church is in the cycle?

And if it is possible, would anybody listen to that person or those people? Is it possible for us to be able to tell whether or not we have bypassed the blessing, only to wait another five, 10, 15 years for it to come around again?

Or is it possible for God to say, okay, you're behaving today, now you can have it? No, you know as well as I do. There has to be, you have to pay your dues. You have to show, you know, even with forgiveness.

Okay, even with forgiveness. It's always much harder to forgive someone continuously if they're committing the same thing day after day after day after day. But if there's 15 years in between the first time and the second time, oh, you're much more graceful. Why? Because you understand that that distance in between where they hadn't done it allows you the grace and the strength of grace to be present when they do do it. But time after time after time, well, patience wears thin, doesn't it? And we're not Jesus.

Not perfect. What does that mean then for us as we sit here? Well, is it possible that as we congregate together that we don't actually see? Is it possible that in our members meetings, we've actually done things that have destroyed entering into the blessings of God? Is it possible at least? And would we even recognize those things if someone pointed them out to us? And perhaps the reason why someone doesn't point something out is because the person knows all too well that even if he did or she did, the people that he points them out to would never see it. Would never see it. You know that age-old riddle? You know, if a tree fell in the forest while no one was there, would anyone hear it fall? Sounds like a ridiculous question. But the point is, is something happened that no one else is around to notice it? If something happens that no one else sees, does it actually happen? Well, yes, it does happen. But it doesn't happen in the minds and hearts of all the people that missed it.

[25 : 23] That's what Paul's getting at. That's the subtlety that Paul has here and the level of discernment that he wants us to have as we think about the past. Think about Nehemiah. He enters in, everything seems to be going well, but the end of the book is just like the beginning. The people, the time of blessing that Nehemiah could have had and brought the people into was theirs for the taking, but it didn't happen. What about Nebuchadnezzar? Nebuchadnezzar was challenged by God to the point where he had to spend seven periods of time, however long that was, we don't know. And he would be taken from his kingly palace and made like an ox of the field even to eat grass until he so recognized that God, the true God, is the one who had the power over all the nations. And until that happened, he was not restored to his former glory. Yeah, there seems to be a pattern, doesn't there, all the way through the Bible of how God does things. Let's close then with this exhortation.

I don't want to make predictions and I don't think any of us should make predictions, but I think we need a level of discernment. And the level of discernment is being able to notice in scripture what we notice in our church or the other way around, to notice in our church what we notice in scripture. You know, revival matters. It matters so very, very much. But as I said at the beginning, it's perhaps more predictable than you think. It is perhaps less elusive than you think.

Perhaps revival happens not by simply praying for it, but by actually moving into the position where revival can actually be brought to God's people through faith and obedience to his word.

Why do you think Paul is telling the Corinthian church about people hundreds of years before them that have no bearing on them now? Well, because he's saying it's no different for you than it was for them before God. I guess the challenge is this. As a church, we shouldn't render ourselves to the position of bypassing the blessing of God. Though we may have already done it or may not have done it in whatever it may be. God obviously doesn't owe any of us blessing of any kind, but it's clearly that he hands out his blessing in patterns. And he hands out his blessing to people who live by faith and obedience. Those who honor him, he honors.

Here's another thing that we need to understand as we sort of wrap it up. One of the ideas that God's people ought to have all the time, but I think we forget in the 20th century, 21st century, is simply this idea that the modern church really needs to reflect the same kind of pattern as the people of God of old. And what I mean by that is, is if you have God's people wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years, you know that you're together.

[28 : 42] You know that in that kind of environment, whatever decision I make is going to affect the person next to me and maybe next to them and next to them. You know that that unity, that if, you know, if I nudge him, he will nudge and so forth and so on. But when we get into the church, even in Paul's day in the Corinthian church, that seems to be lost. Why? Because people go back to their own homes, not wandering around together. They do their own things throughout the week. They're not, they're not perhaps meeting up as much as being together for 40 years in the wilderness. And then they come out to church on Sunday and they have to be taken back to a time and place that they know nothing of themselves experientially to be taught a lesson that they should know. What does it mean? Well, it means this.

It's not just the decisions we make in the church that can cause us to bypass the blessing of God. But it's what you do throughout the week, even before you come to church.

That's the lesson. And we see that lesson spelled out in the book of Amos, where God's people come to worship God on the Lord's day. And God, you read it for yourself, puts his hands over his ears. I don't want to listen. I don't want to listen. Why? Because he says, I've seen what you've been up to throughout the week. And then you come to church on Sunday and expect your cup to be full. I don't want to listen to you. Now, that's not a, that's not a judgment on, on anybody. What it is, it is an indication of what God takes into consideration. It's not just the decisions we make at members meetings, not even close to it. It's the decisions that all of us are making all the time outside of this church. Our loyalties, our allegiances, what we, what we turn a blind eye to that God notices.

All of those things, because God's people are counted as one in the presence of God, are things that can either stop the blessing of God or bring great, or and bring great conviction to us that we may notice what God is doing.

I guess what I'm saying in short, if I can close with this, that wherever we find ourselves before God as a church, the things to take notice of is not just what happens in here, but it's the things that we're up to when we're not in here that God takes into consideration.

[31 : 17] So when we come to our members meetings, and we're tempted to say, it's because the church did this, or the church has done that, or in the past, the church did this when it should have done that.

Okay, I understand. There's a far deeper issue there. What about all the things that you were doing outside of the church that perhaps you shouldn't have been?

All the things that you were giving your allegiances and loyalty to you that you shouldn't do. You don't think that has an effect on the blessing of God? No, it does. It really does.

I want revival. I want the church to flourish in Scotland. I want people to be the best possible version of the Christian that they can be.

And I know how they can be that. And it only can happen by God blessing. I can't get myself there, and I can't get you there, and you can't get me there, and you can't get yourself there.

[32 : 16] But God can get us there. And he will get us there by simply humbly living by faith in obedience to his word. That's how we get there. In short, the blessing of God is always ahead of God's people.

We have never bypassed it so many times that we cannot enter into it again. But discernment is needed so that we understand where we are, so that we don't bypass it.

And the past is there so that we may learn from it. I'll finish with this. Did you notice what Paul said in verse 6? And do you know what it means for us?

Because it's almost sarcastically funny. He's getting us today to look back on a church who's looking back on a church because none of us seem to be learning from the past.

If only we would. Amen.