

THE OLD TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF REVIVAL

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IT WOULD BE HARD to deny that there is a growing interest in the subject of revival. All the major denominations now have revival fellowships. Small groups are springing up here and there for the sole purpose of praying for revival. The Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference of December 1959 was brought to a close with a paper on 'Revival, a Historical and Theological Approach'. A recent issue of the popular magazine *Crusade* (Nov. 1960) was largely taken up with answering the question, 'Do we need revival?'

How are we to account for this quietly growing interest? In the main it is due to an increasing sense of feebleness in Christian work. Ministers who faithfully proclaim the Word of God week by week see few or no results. Despite an increase in the number of evangelical ministers there does not appear to be a corresponding growth of the work. Campaigns, large and small, make an insignificant dent in the world's indifference. The mass of people are untouched. Christians themselves grow cold and become indifferent, critical and lifeless. Keswick speakers have to address themselves in the main not to the spiritually robust but to the sick and languid. 'We are not what we ought to be,' is the cry of many. It may well be that God's mercy is being shown to us through this increased interest in revival.

But what is revival? Because the word does not appear in Scripture we cannot give a neat pat answer via a few well-chosen texts. This, however, does not mean that a biblical answer cannot be given. The word 'Trinity' does not occur in the Scriptures, but this does not stop us using the word or confirming from Scripture the existence of one God in three persons. So with revival: the word does not occur, but the concept does.

The verb 'to revive' occurs several times in the Old Testament and is a translation of the Hebrew verb *chayah*. It is used in several ways. When Jacob's sons returned from Egypt with the news that Joseph was alive, 'his heart fainted, for he did not believe them. But . . . when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, *the spirit of their father Jacob revived*' (Gn. xlv. 26f.). When Samson had tired himself out after slaughtering the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, he cried to God for water, and 'God split open the hollow place, . . . and there came water from it; and when he drank, *his spirit returned, and he revived*' (Jdg. xv. 19). In both these cases weakness gave way to strength. The word is also used to denote recovery from sickness (Jos. v. 8, 'till they were healed' i.e. until their strength returned and they recovered). See also 1 Ki. viii. 8-10; Nu. xxi. 8f.) or even from death (2 Ki. xiii. 12). Ruined cities when restored are said to be revived (1 Ch. xi. 8 Heb.). Dr. A. R. Johnson writes, 'Thus the verb Qal, i.e. *chay* or *chayah* (to live) is used idiomatically not only of survival, nor even simply of revival as restoration from death in the normal sense of the latter term, but also of "revival" as recovery from bodily weakness of any kind' (*The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*, p. 95). The idea contained in the verb seems, then, to be 'quickening' or 'restoring' or 'refreshing'. The discouraged man is revived, the fainting man refreshed, the sick restored, the dead quickened.

But the verb is also applied to man's *spiritual* weakness. In the Old Testament we have the possibility of the reviving of the spirit (*ruach*) and heart (*leb*) of the people (Is. lvii. 15). The psalmist cries out not for a personal revival but for a national revival, 'Restore us, O Lord God of hosts! let thy face shine, that we may be saved' (i.e. revived, restored. Ps. lxxx. 19. See also Ps. lxxxv. 6 and the numerous references to quickening in Ps. cxix). In times of spiritual depression and defeat the people called on God to revive, i.e. to give life.

From the biblical evidence certain facts emerge:

i. It is only that which has life which can be revived. Revival can only have reference in the *first* place to the people of God. To hold 'revival meetings' for the conversion of sinners is to do something the

Scripture does not sanction. Only Christians can be revived. Sinners need to be resurrected. Of course, it goes without saying that, once Christians are revived, sinners will be converted.

ii. It is only God who can revive. 'Wilt *thou* not revive us again,' cries the psalmist (Ps. lxxxv. 6; the *thou* is emphatic). 'Restore us, O Lord God of Hosts' (Ps. lxxx. 19). God's people look to Him to do for them what they cannot do for themselves. The fainting Samson looks to heaven for strength, the discouraged Jacob to Joseph's wagons. There is no such thing as a self-induced revival. Revival is God's prerogative. Not infrequently we hear people speaking of 'conditional revival'. While acknowledging God's power alone to revive, it is suggested that if certain conditions are fulfilled God *will*, nay *must*, revive. To support this claim such verses as 2 Chronicles vii. 14 and Joel ii. 12f. are quoted.

The first thing to say is that these passages belong to certain specific historical situations and cannot be applied indiscriminately to every situation. It is clear from Israel's history that God did not always deal so graciously with her as to promise her salvation upon the fulfilment of certain conditions. To Habakkuk He said, 'I am rousing up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize habitations not their own' (Hab. i. 6). Here is judgment, not mercy, rejection, not revival. In our own day we have to decide, 'Is God calling us to fulfil conditions or is He calling us to remove His judgment?'

Again, we might ask, 'If God will send revival upon the fulfilment of certain conditions, why has He not done so?' There are only two possibilities. Either God has failed to keep His promises, which is unthinkable, or men are unable to fulfil His conditions. If this is so, it can only mean that God's judgment is upon His people and that we must cry for its removal. Instead of trying to fulfil conditions which will bring in revival we must ask God to remove His judgment and show His mercy. Even our turning back to God is something which we cannot do without His aid. We moan and complain to God about our weakness, when perhaps we need to moan and complain about our strength, our independence, our self-satisfaction. When God said to His people through Jeremiah, 'Return, O faithless children, . . . and I will bring you to Zion' (Je. iii. 14), Jeremiah cried out, 'Restore us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old!' (Lam. v. 21). 'Give us life, and we will call on thy name!' says the psalmist (Ps. lxxx. 18).

iii. Revival means an increase of life for God's people. Life for the Christian is knowing God (Jn. xvii. 3). A time of revival is a time of knowing God more truly. It will bring in its wake conviction of sin, joy, peace and greater love for God. *He* will be all in all to His people.

If revival, then, is our need, what must we do? First, we must continue to preach, teach and pray. We must preach, teach and pray *more*. We must not abandon everything and wait for revival.

Second, in our praying we must start further back and ask Him to incline our hearts toward Him. We must ask Him to increase our desire for prayer and the Scriptures. We must plead our weakness and cry out for His strength. We must urge God to take away His judgment from His church and grant mercy and life.

Third, we must plead God's glory. We want revival not because we are sick and tired of our weak state, nor because it would be so much easier to live a Christian life, but because a revival would greatly honour God. If we are unconcerned for His glory this is only a further sign of our pitiful condition and we must ask Him to make us concerned. God's name is being dishonoured daily and we ought to be concerned about it and pray that through the revival of His people He may be glorified.

O Lord, revive Thy work!
Regard Thy 'planted' vine;
Behold us each, through Christ Thy Son
For Thee, for Thee we pine.
This is our heartfelt prayer,
Content we cannot be;
We will not, dare not let Thee rest,
Till we Thy glory see.