

The Foundation of a Life of Blessing

Michael Plant was an experienced sailor who had sailed solo around the world twice. On Oct. 16, 1992, Plant launched his \$650,000 high tech single-person sailboat from New York in a four-month race to France. But it wasn't long into the trip before he started having trouble. A Russian freighter picked up a radio transmission from him just five days later. Plant said that he had no power but was working on the problem. He ended that transmission by saying, "Tell my fiancé not to worry." That was the last direct communication anyone ever had with Plant. 32 days later, his boat, drifting upside down, was spotted by a Greek tanker, and there was no sign of Plant. The mast was still fully sailed and the hull was intact, but the 8,400-pound lead keel bulb that weighted the boat had been sheared off. To this day, no one knows how it happened, but without the weight of that ballast, the small boat was useless and doomed in rough seas.¹

In Malachi chapter two, God accuses the priests in Jerusalem of being the crux of Israel's problem. Because of their unfaithfulness, which consisted of disobedience to God's commands and disrespect for His name, God was very angry with Israel. In fact, God said to the priests:

"If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name... then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings...." (Mal. 2:2)

Wow! That's pretty harsh! And God goes on, using even more colorful language, to condemn the priests for their arrogance, pride and disregard for His Word. What should this tell us as we think about generosity? It should tell us that a lack of generosity in a culture is, at its base, a spiritual problem. True religion, religion that directs people to the one, true, living God, is the foundation that will determine whether a nation is biblically generous or even whether a nation is blessed or cursed by God! The place that biblical faith has in a society determines its economic, political and social wellbeing. It's the ballast that allows the 'ship of state' to sail smoothly in calm seas and to survive in stormy seas. Without the weight of biblical truth, laid and maintained by biblically faithful churches, a nation will eventually go belly up. That's what God was predicting for Israel if it didn't change course:

"For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. (Addressing the priests) You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi..." (Mal. 2:7-8)

God promised to bless Israel if the priests, the descendants of Levi, would "*observe your word and ...teach... Israel your law.*" (Deut. 33:9, 10) The fate of the nation was determined by whether or not the priests faithfully fulfilled that covenant.

But the priests in Malachi's day WEREN'T fulfilling the covenant, so what was needed? Revival was needed. And what does revival look like? First...

I. There Must Be a Change in Thinking.

Revival isn't really a biblical word. You won't find it in Bible Dictionaries or concordances. But the concept of being spiritually revived is a constant theme of the Old Testament prophets and of the New Testament writers. Ps. 85:6 says, "*Will you not revive us again...?*" Charles Spurgeon points out that the word "revive" means to live again, to receive again a life that was almost expired. So, this concept is directed at those who have the life of the

Spirit, not those who are dead in their sin. These are whom God is addressing through the prophet Malachi, the people of Israel whose faith, like a fire nearly extinguished, needs to be rekindled.

Romans 12 shows us the process of spiritual revival. It says:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1-2)

In verse one, Paul is appealing to Christians to make a total commitment of themselves to God. We'll say more about that in a minute. But in verse two he says that we do that by first, having our minds renewed. There are two important clues in the grammar of these verses. First, the Greek word for 'be transformed' is passive imperative. So, we don't do this to ourselves but we have it done to us. You receive this transformation. Who does it then? It is done by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the word for 'renewal' is a present tense verb, which means this is a process that continues on. It's not a one-time act, like having brain surgery. It's a process.

So, in simple terms, to be transformed so that our lives are acceptable to God, we allow the Holy Spirit to change our thinking, to renew our minds, and we submit to His continuing to do this throughout our lives.

And how specifically is that done? Is it through dreams or does the Holy Spirit come in some hocus-pocus way and magically change our minds so that one minute we thought sinning was great and the next minute – voila!! – now I agree with God's way? No. Our minds are renewed through the process whereby the Holy Spirit enables us to absorb God's Word. How do I know that? It doesn't say that in this passage. No, but Jesus says exactly this to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3.

Some of these churches have fallen into various forms of apostasy. How did that happen? They were deceived by false teaching. To the church in Pergamum, Jesus says:

“But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam... So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent....” (Rev. 2:14-16)

Likewise, the church in Thyatira got into trouble because...

“...you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants...” (Rev. 2:20)

To the church in Sardis, Jesus identifies the same sort of 'falling away' problem, but then gives the solution:

“You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains... Remember, then, what you received and heard. (What they'd heard in the past was teaching from God's Word!) Keep it, and repent....” (Rev. 3:1-3)

To the church in Philadelphia, Jesus acknowledges that they have been under attack from the synagogue of Satan. Listen to what He says next:

“Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming...” (Rev. 3:10)

And how were each of these messages delivered to these seven churches? Every message begins by Jesus saying to John: (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18)

To the angel of the church in _____ write:

The words of him who holds the seven stars...

The words of the first and the last...

The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

The words of the Son of God...

Jesus delivered the remedy to their problem in words!

The Word of God is preventative: (Ps. 119:11)

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.

It is preservative: (Ps. 119:107 NIV 1984)

I have suffered much;

preserve my life, O Lord, according to your word.

It is restorative: (Ps. 119:147)

I rise before dawn and cry for help;

I hope in your words.

The Holy Spirit renews our minds through God's Word! So, if you're not in God's Word daily, your mind isn't being renewed, it is in spiritual decay.

Which leads us to the second step of revival which is...

II. A Maturing Faith.

Malachi obeyed God and spoke His Word to the Israelites. It had to be hard for many of them to hear it because, as is true with all the prophets, his message was from God! Listen:

You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17)

Do you see what God is saying? He's saying, "You guys aren't living by my rules.

You're just making up your own rules and claiming they come from me. You're putting words into my mouth! You're trying to redefine reality. Well, guess what? It won't work!"

Do you know anyone who tries to redefine reality? Cheryl Levin, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune, wrote an article about how guys try to redefine reality with their girlfriends. She made a list of the rules guys wished their girlfriends would live by. Here are just a few:

- Anything we said six months ago is inadmissible in an argument. All comments become null and void after seven days. (Yeah, you wish!)
- Come to us with a problem only if you want help solving it. That's what we do. Sympathy is what your girlfriends are for.
- Whenever possible, please say whatever you have to say during commercials.
- You can either ask us to do something or tell us how you want it done, not both.
- "Yes" and "no" are perfectly acceptable answers to almost every question.
- If we ask what's wrong and you say, "Nothing," we will act like nothing's wrong. We know you're lying, but it's just not worth the hassle.

Guess what guys? Those rules are forged! Follow them only if you want to experience relational judgment! That's what God essentially said to the Israelites. Listen to God's next words (Ladies, maybe these could be your words to your man if he tries to live by those rules?):

"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap... and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then I will draw near to you for judgment. (Malachi 3:1-3, 5)

I promise you, guys, if you try to live by any of those rules, this prophecy will come true for you!

So, what is God hoping to accomplish with these wayward children of His? He's hoping that they will grow up, that they will mature, that they will be revived and restored. And what does that revived or restored 'state of being' look like?

Jonathan Edwards was a pastor in North Hampton, MA, during the time of what is known as the First Great Awakening. It took place 30 years before the revolution and was easily the most widespread spiritual revival this new country had ever seen. Edwards wrote a description of it called the "*Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God.*" He said there were five characteristics of revival that he witnessed in his church and town and in other churches and towns throughout New England. This revival caused:

1. Jesus to be more highly esteemed.
2. Satan's kingdom to suffer loss.
3. Men and women to have a greater response to Scripture.
4. Men and women to see more clearly spiritual truth and error.
5. A new sense of love toward God and others.

Have you ever seen or experienced anything like this, where the Spirit of God moved upon a group of Christians, and they suddenly had a new thirst for God and His Word and a revived love for others? Have you ever experience that?

In 1995, the college Liz and I attended, Wheaton College in Illinois, experienced a revival like this. It happened this way: back then, there was a voluntary praise and worship service every Sunday night at 7:30 that was student led. On a night in March, there were about 800 students in attendance. The student organizer introduced two students from Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas. They had come to tell of an unusual experience that they'd had on their campus just two months earlier. He explained that they would each speak briefly and then there were two microphones set up for Wheaton students who wanted to ask questions or make comments.

The first Howard Payne student, named Brandi, described how God had brought spiritual revival to her school and she concluded her remarks by saying, "I have no idea what God is going to do here, but I do pray that you all can experience the tremendous blessing we received at Howard Payne." The other student, James, a huge football player, spoke about how personal the experience was for him. He told how he had gotten up before a crowd like this one at Wheaton and confessed some personal sins. He said this confession had brought reconciliation with God, a deep inner peace, and a renewed sense of oneness with his fellow students.

After Brandi and James sat down, the Wheaton students were strangely quiet. Matt Yarrington, the Wheaton student coordinator, got up and said, "No one is trying to orchestrate a replica of what happened at Howard Payne, but the microphones are here if anyone has a comment or a question." Almost immediately, a Wheaton senior got up, confessed sins of pride, and asked his fellow Wheaton classmates for forgiveness. Within minutes, lines formed at both microphones with Wheaton students, each one confessing sin and asking God and the campus for forgiveness. When one young woman confessed a sexual sin and began to sob, dozens of other young women rushed up to embrace her and formed a prayer circle around her. There was never any attempt to stir up emotions or keep momentum going. Spontaneously, God was reviving His people.

Some students went back to their dorm rooms to tell their friends what was happening. It continued throughout the night. At 6 a.m. the next morning, the student leaders announced that they would take a break until 9:30 Monday night. When they reconvened, the crowd had grown

to a thousand. This time it went until 2 a.m. Because of the numbers coming, on Tuesday it was moved to a nearby church that could hold 1,500 and where it continued for three more days.

One female student who I'll call Cheryl (not her real name) heard about all this and was really skeptical, but decided to go check it out. While she was sitting in the back, a friend who she had been fighting with came over and asked if they could go downstairs and talk. This friend apologized for her part in their disagreements and asked to be forgiven. Suddenly, Cheryl realized what was happening. God was cleansing and renewing people's hearts. So, Cheryl decided she needed to go upstairs and confess as well. Her friend went with her and stood with her at the microphone while she did it.

"Afterwards," Cheryl said, "I was talking to this guy who was crying and saying that this is what the church should be like. We saw people just loving each other, regardless of anything. If church were like that, then who wouldn't want to be a Christian?"²

In Romans 12:1 Paul writes:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

After the revival in Jonathan Edwards' day, dozens of new ministries were formed. Ministries like missionary outreach and orphanages and prison ministries. Likewise, at Wheaton in the months following this dramatic movement of the Spirit of God, hundreds of students, completely on their own, chose to volunteer their time to help with youth groups or tutoring kids in the inner city or to go on school-sponsored mission trips. When your heart is revived, you become more generous, not because you "have to" but because you "get to."

God also brought revival to the Israelites in Malachi's day. Listen to God's reaction to those who chose to be revived: Malachi 3:16-18:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him."

What challenges are you facing right now in your life? Is it possible that the real problem is in your relationship with your Father in heaven? It's easy to allow a coolness to creep in. It's not that you don't still love God, it's just that you're so busy, you're distracted, separated. You don't need to live this way! God can restore you, revive you spiritually. Yes, there may need to be some confessing of sin, but He's already promised to forgive you. We really can't bless others if things aren't right between us and the Father. Will you ask Him to revive you right now? Nothing else will be right, until you do that. But when you do, your Father will say, "You're mine! You are my treasured possession! Now, let's go solve those challenges together!" Let's pray...

¹ Wayne Cordeiro, *Doing Church as a Team* (Ventura: Regal, 2009), pp. 79-80

² Timothy K. Beougher, Lyle W. Dorsett, *Accounts of a Campus Revival* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers), pp. 76, 77, 121, 122