

Restoration
September/October 1989

Times of Refreshing - A New Testament Beginning

The New Testament basis for the expectation of end-time revival

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Contrary to nature; unsupported by past experience; impossible in the present circumstances. Those were the facts. But this was God's word, his plan that had been revealed - and by an angel, at that! The Son of the Most High was coming, he had said, to occupy David's throne and to rule over an everlasting kingdom.

Not that the appearance of the promised Messiah posed a problem to her. Like others of the faithful remnant, she had longed and prayed for that day. And the expectation of the kingdom of God burned brightly in the aspirations of her heart.

No, her confusion was not in the *purpose* - but in the *process*. For she, Mary - a virgin — was to give birth to the Son of God. No wonder that the question filling her mind and tumbling from her mouth was, 'How will this be?'

And in answer the angel Gabriel brought a revelation of how *all* the 'impossible' purposes of God are caused to prosper: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you' (Luke 1:26-35).

God's intervention

The progress of God's eternal plan, apparently pedestrian at times, is at other times dynamically and dramatically advanced by divine intervention and Holy Spirit visitation.

The Old Testament is full of prophetic promise and historic example of this principle. Men like Zerubbabel learned by word and experience that the work of God is founded and finished, that mountains of unclimbable obstruction are transformed into plains of easy access, not by human might and power, "but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty' (Zechariah 4).

If old covenant saints, who without us could not be made perfect, experienced great and gracious seasons of visitation, how much more should we, who are partakers of a better covenant founded upon better promises? In fact, most of the old covenant promises are actually for the new covenant people.

Day and days

One important example beautifully illustrates this. At the end of the book of Amos, God makes this remarkable promise: 'The days are coming... when the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman and the planter by the one treading grapes' (Amos 9:13).

The Lord speaks of future days when a great escalation of ingathering will be experienced. Days when the process of sowing and reaping will merge into one continuous operation. Days of perpetual harvest. But when are those days to be?

Immediately preceding that promise is another: 'In that day I will restore David's fallen tent' (Amos 9:11).

That day of restoration was inaugurated by the coming of Jesus. (Remember Gabriel's words to Mary?) And the *day* of restoration was to be followed by *days* of revival. The church of the New Testament understood these verses from Amos as proof of a world- wide move of the Holy Spirit to gather men and women from every nation into the church of Jesus Christ (Acts 15:13-18).

The risen Christ had instructed his disciples that the endowment of power from on high would equip them to be effective witnesses to the ends of the earth. The day of Pentecost itself furnished them with an eloquent demonstration of this when, in a moment of time, 'devout men from every nation under heaven' heard and responded to the word of God.

In his message that day Peter explained: in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord' (Acts 2:17-21).

Notice once more the interaction between 'days' and 'day'. The whole cosmic purpose of God will be consummated in one 'great and glorious day'. But that day is to be preceded by days in which God has promised to pour out his Spirit upon all people.

Time to restore

Peter makes that point again after the healing of the lame man at the temple gate. 'Repent,' he commanded the people, ' . . . that your sins may be wiped out, that *times of refreshing* may come from the Lord! And then, speaking of the promised second coming of Christ, he explained, 'He must remain in heaven until *the time comes for God to restore everything*' (Acts 3:19-21).

The universal recovery programme of God, inaugurated at the coming of his Son into the world, reaches its glorious completion when Jesus comes again. But the time of ultimate restoration is itself the climax of countless times of refreshing.

The early disciples did not rely exclusively on their initial Holy Spirit baptism at Pentecost. It was a glorious beginning, but still only the beginning. New departures would require new demonstrations. Threatening antagonism demanded a fresh anointing.

So, in Acts 4, we discover their heart cry and heaven's response - physical shaking, spiritual filling, bold declaration, powerful demonstration - as God again intervened with a Holy Spirit visitation.

Harvests before the harvest

But it is not only the Acts of the Apostles that gives strong confirmation to the idea of revival being a major means of kingdom expansion. The earthly ministry of Jesus provides further examples.

In his parables of the kingdom, Jesus often used an agricultural analogy. The parable of the weeds, which he explained in great detail to the disciples (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43), portrays 'the end of the age' as the ultimate harvest - the gathering up of both the righteous and the wicked.

As Acts shows us that 'the day' is preceded by 'days', and 'the time' by 'times', it is not surprising to find Jesus talking of harvests before the harvest. Remember, Amos had spoken of unseasonal harvests in the days to come - and Jesus produced them! If the disciples were accustomed to saying, 'Four months more and then the harvest', Jesus heightened their expectation and hastened the day by declaring, 'Look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest' (John 4:35).

What was true at that time in Samaria was also true in Judea. 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few; Jesus said. 'Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Matthew 9:37-38). Sometimes, it seems, the need is not so much for God to produce a crop ripe for harvest, but for a people of discerning spirit to see it and of dedicated heart to reap it.

Divine precedent

Since the day of his ascension, Jesus has punctuated the history of his church with sovereign acts of revival. Most of us have read about them and longed for them. But can we legitimately expect them? Charles Spurgeon said, 'What he has done once is a prophecy of what he intends to do again. Whatever God has done in the way of converting sinners is to be looked upon as a precedent!

It seems to me beyond question that the world is destined for a great and glorious revival in which multitudes will be swept into the kingdom of God.

John saw it like this: 'Before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man" with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then [an] angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe!" So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested' (Revelation 14:14-16).

Jewish awakening

One great promise (and as yet unfulfilled) ingathering alone should be enough to enliven the confidence of our faith. In Romans 11, Paul alludes to a mighty move of God among the Jews. Not that they are somehow to supplant the church as God's people, but that they are to be grafted back into the original rootstock of God's holy covenants as part of his church. This will come about when 'the fulness of the Gentiles has come in'.

In his commentary on Romans, John Murray says of this expression, 'The fulness of the Gentiles denotes unprecedented blessing on them, but does not exclude even greater blessings to follow'.

Surely what we are seeing here is continual revivals of increasing magnitude among Gentiles, leading to a dynamic awakening among the Jews. And even that is not the end.' For if Israel's loss was the means of the Gentiles' riches, how much greater riches will their fulness bring! If their rejection resulted in the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!

John Wesley's notes on Romans contain this comment: 'When [the salvation of Israel] is accomplished, it will be so strong a demonstration... as will doubtless convince many thousand [nominal Christians].... And this will be a means of swiftly propagating the gospel among [Muslims] and pagans!

The church came to birth in the fires of revival - and will come to its fulness in the midst of an even greater blaze of glory. The former rain produced the firstfruits; the latter rain will herald the harvest home. But in the time between, every generation in every nation must stir its own expectation of Holy Spirit visitation.

'Revive your work in the midst of the years!' (Habakkuk 3:2 RAV) must be the ceaseless prayer of the church of God.