

WHAT MAY WE EXPECT NEXT?

First in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Revival* from Acts 8:4-25
“Those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.” Acts 8:4

What a great day we had last Sunday! It was extremely moving to me as hundreds of our congregation—children, youth and adults--presented their gifts and pledges to God for our *Reaching Beyond Ourselves* campaign. And the celebration meal afterwards served 700 with what seemed like effortless simplicity. Those of you who worked so hard did a terrific job! It was a moment we will not soon forget!

So the next logical question is, “What’s next?” If you think that “next” means asphalt and paint, or a building rising on a parcel of land, then you must realize that you’ve got your eyes on the wrong things. Those projects will indeed be undertaken, and with God’s help completed. But we ought first of all to be looking for something else. Simply put, we ought to be looking for revival, or spiritual awakening—in ourselves and in others. For if some sort of spiritual outpouring doesn’t result from our prayers and plans and giving, then we’ve been wasting our time.

Today and for several weeks this Summer I want to talk with you about revival—about people coming to Christ, about the church of the Lord Jesus being unleashed. I want to explore a number of revivals recorded in the Bible, and study with you how God used various tools—preaching, worship, fellowship and teaching, obedience, the word of God, repentance, and the outpouring of God’s Spirit—to breathe life into his church and to draw thousands and eventually millions of people to faith in Christ. A lot of what we will be considering together will be intensely practical, focusing on what you and I can do ourselves—in our personal relationship with God, in our homes, in our community, and of course in our church. Turn with me please to Acts chapter 8. As we move through the passage that concludes at verse 25 we will see four things: **1. Revival was sown in suffering, 2. Revival surfaced in a strange place, 3. Revival was sabotaged by Simon, and 4. Revival was salvaged by God’s Spirit.**

1. Revival was sown in suffering. When Jesus parted from his apostles for the last time, he commanded them to go into all the world proclaiming Christ and making disciples. They were to start in Jerusalem, then spread into the territory of Judea, then go to Samaria; and finally, expand across the whole world. But they hadn’t gone. They remained in Jerusalem. I have no doubt that they were doing important work. They had to get organized. They had to make plans. There were plenty of people who needed to be preached to and gathered into congregations around the city. There were widows and orphans whom they had to care for. Plus there was the fellowship that was sweet and rich. And so, preoccupied with all of this, they found one reason after another to remain in the city. Months passed. Years flew by. And they didn’t move.

So God moved them.. We might even say he drove them out. Acts chapter 7 gives an account of the martyrdom of Stephen. Stephen was one of the original deacons elected at the beginning of Acts 6. He became an amazingly effective evangelist. He performed miracles. And he made enemies. These had him arrested and tried before the

Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin. His defense enraged them so much that they pulled him outside and lynched him, stoning him to death. The murder of Stephen seemed to be the catalyst for violent attacks all the Christians in Jerusalem. Acts 8:1 tells us that the violence was so fierce that thousands of them fled for their lives. Verse 1 says, “*They were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria.*” Then comes our introduction to Saul of Tarsus. Verse 3 says, “*Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.*”

Some Christians secretly rejoice when they hear about persecution, thinking that when Christians face persecution revival always emerges from it. That happened in China after 1949 when the missionaries were expelled by the Communists. But in the 800s Muslims wiped out the church in North Africa and buried the Christian culture which until then had been one of the centers of Christianity. In the 1500s the Japanese slaughtered literally every Christian in Japan, committing unspeakable atrocities. Here in Acts 8 Luke’s language is so strong that we may compare it to scenes of Christ’s scourging in the movie, *The Passion*. Think of sorrows, the tears, and the horror. Families torn apart. Children screaming and left as orphans. Not only were men brutalized, Luke says Saul ravished women too. Broken bodies. Broken lives. Bloody destruction. As believers fled Jerusalem, this was a church suffering and defeated.

Whenever a church neglects to move out with the gospel, God either allows it to die or he permits them to suffer until they begin to go. At Cornerstone we have tried to be obedient. We’ve felt strongly that God has called us to reach our whole community, and as a result we’ve branched out, and it has cost us something. Following Christ always does. It isn’t comfortable. But the point here is that revival comes when the church moves forward and we discover that the task that God has given us is greater than our abilities and we must depend on God. Suffering is another way we learn to depend on God. When we do revival follows. If you are suffering today, or if you are committed to serving Christ, you are in the place where God can revive your heart for him. The church in Acts 8 discovered by defeat and suffering that God had led them to look to him for help. And a great revival was the result.

2. Revival surfaced in a strange place. Isn’t it interesting that Samaria was one of the places God had told the early church to go in the first place? In verse 5 we see that Philip went to Samaria and began to tell the people there about Jesus. Philip, like Stephen, was one of the original deacons in the Jerusalem church. And like Stephen he was an effective evangelist.

Let me remind you a bit about the Samaritans. The Samaritans traced their ancestry back more than 700 years. When the nation of Israel had been overrun by the Assyrians, the conquerors deported the Israelite population and replaced them with people they had conquered in other countries. Over the generations, through intermarriage, an ethnically mixed population emerged. They combined pagan beliefs with the remains of Biblical religion. What these people believed, then, was a hodge-podge of twisted theology. By Jesus’ time the Jews and the Samaritans despised each other so much that Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem went far out of their way to

avoid going through Samaria. You may recall how Jesus on one occasion went straight through Samaria and met a very sinful woman at the well outside a Samaritan village. She believed in him as the Savior and led the whole village to Christ as well. Nevertheless, the early church, made up exclusively of Jewish believers, was reluctant to cross the border into Samaria to take the gospel to people different from themselves. That was why God had to push them. Before we pat ourselves on the back, think about the Bible believing church in America. Who do we appeal to? We do very well with middle class white American families. When it comes to other ethnic groups, or to the poor, or to singles, we're not so successful.

So it was quite amazing that revival broke out among the Samaritans. Verse 6 says, "*The multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip.*" Notice what else was happening. Verse 6 says Philip was able to perform miracles. And verse 7 tells us that there was a lot of demon possession among the Samaritans, and the demons were being dramatically cast out of people. Paralyzed people freed to move, and lame people were able to walk. This is a singular case. We should not expect miracles like these to occur in present day revivals. God was giving special authentication to the gospel, for he was teaching the church that he endorsed their outreach to non-Jewish people. Verse 12 says men and women were being baptized and brought into the church. For the Jerusalem Christians it was a shocker. The point to take from this however, is that God wants us to cross every human barrier to go to people in need with the gospel. We can't just call them to come. They won't. We must go. We must reach beyond ourselves. When we do, revival follows. Who are the people around us who need to experience revival? Who is on the other side of the line that God wants you to go to, or wants us to go together? Think that one through. Philip went to Samaria as a refugee, saw the need, and led the way. And God blessed. Verse 8 says there was much rejoicing.

3. Revival was sabotaged by Simon. Whenever revival begins we may expect Satan to oppose it and try to stop it. Sometimes his means are very subtle. In verses 9-11 we are introduced to a man named Simon who is known to church history as Simon Magus. Notice some things about him. Verse 9 says that Simon had been practicing magic in the capital city of Samaria. This was not fairy tale magic or Harry Potter magic—make-believe stuff. This was real, sinister, occult arts—spells and curses and supposed miracles. We don't see too much of this in America, but in the first century world it was everywhere. Simon's magic was linked to the demonic powers. You remember we just mentioned that many Samaritans were demon possessed. Simon awed people and they believed in his tricks. Notice what they called him in verse 10: "*The Great Power of God.*" Simon heard the gospel and saw the miracles which were greater than his own sleight of hand, and verse 13 tells us that he professed faith in Christ and was baptized. This was quite a coup, to have a celebrity like Simon change sides. Verse 13 says he began to hang out with Philip and followed the evangelist wherever he went.

The revival in Samaria grew so great that the Apostle Peter came to check it out. It was at this point that Simon revealed his true heart. In verses 18-19 Simon offered to pay Peter if he would give him the power of the Holy Spirit. I want you to notice Peter's response to Simon in verses 20-21. "*May your silver perish with you, because you*

thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.” Do you know what the Greek literally says? “Simon, take your money and go to hell!” And it wasn’t just an expression.

The church fathers of the second and third centuries identified Simon Magus as the leader of Christian Gnosticism. Gnosticism teaches that you may be enlightened if you have secret knowledge. Perhaps you recall the recent fuss in the news over the Gospel of Judas. That was a Gnostic text. Gnosticism became a powerful counterfeit in the second and third centuries and it almost destroyed the church. It’s back in our day. It lies at the heart of the *Da Vinci Code*. It’s wrapped in the veneer of liberal Christian theology. It is the philosophy behind the reappearance of paganism in our time. If you wonder how the moral values of American culture could collapse in one generation; if you are concerned about the antichristian thought that assaults your kids at college; if you are reeling from the popular acceptance of same sex marriage or feel the pressure of Al Gore’s inconvenient lie about global warming, you’ve encountered Gnosticism. The point here is that true revival always faces opposition, and we must remain alert and become knowledgeable in how to spot it and overcome it. You can’t do that on your own. That’s why we must be together in the church, or our friends and neighbors, and the children growing up in our homes will never hear the true gospel, and they’ll perish.

4. Revival was salvaged by God’s Spirit. The church in Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans had believed in Christ and were being brought into the church. As we said earlier, this was a major departure from what Jewish Christians envisioned the church should be like. They were cautious. The Samaritans’ theology was screwy, they reasoned. Are they really believing correctly now? It’s a legitimate question. I remember years ago an elderly woman in her early eighties who was a strong, life long Unitarian-Universalist showed interest in the gospel. At the urging of a friend of hers I visited her and talked with her about Christ. Unitarians don’t believe Jesus is God, and as you might expect, the place she stumbled was over his deity. I went back two more times, slowly dismantling her unbelief and persuading her that Jesus is indeed God. At last she believed and we baptized her and brought her into the church. Last Sunday as we began our service here, the Hindus across the street were celebrating something or other and we could hear their chants and jingling. A recent issue of *Traveler* magazine has a large section on India. I was struck by a picture of a Hindu woman waiting to be blessed by an elephant. An elephant! If any of the Hindus across the street ever come to faith in Christ they will have a long way to go to shake their pagan mindset. How will we know they truly understand and that they’ve really trusted Jesus to be their Savior? That’s what the Jerusalem church was concerned about. And that’s why they sent Peter to investigate.

There are two dangers here. One is that they don’t really understand the gospel and what you end up with is a false brand of Christianity. The other danger is that we become so tight about holding the right beliefs that we keep people out of the church who rightly should be in it. Christ commands believers to be members of his church so they can grow as disciples. You can see the dilemma. We are either too loose or too cautious. See how Peter solved the problem in verse 15. It says, he “*came down and prayed for*

them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit.” God answered Peter’s prayer and poured out his Spirit upon the Samaritan believers.

Here is what we must learn. There is no revival without God’s Spirit. Every person is so lost in sin that we are completely unable to trust in Christ for salvation unless