

Text: Mark 4:26-29

Title: "The surprise of revival"

Time: 3/13/2021 pm

Place: Hill Village Bible Church

Introduction: I would like to begin this afternoon with an email I received last month from a good ministry friend of mine:

"Dear praying friends,

"I and Orwell Bible Church are so thankful for your laboring together with us in prayer for the cause of Christ. Since I last wrote you about the work here there have been several significant developments, and through God's grace we have by faith responded with, 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'

"On Saturday, January 30, Lydia, the 19-year-old daughter of one of our deacons died in her sleep. Lydia struggled with seizures the last few years of her life. The Lord has graciously sustained and strengthened the family, and their testimony from that moment to the present has been to the praise of His grace. Though there is grief, it has always been with faith and hope in the Lord's sure promises (1 Thess. 4:13-18). 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'

"The week after Lydia's funeral her brother Micah, a young farmer in North Dakota, finally repented of his stubborn rebellion and trusted in Christ. The same day, without either communicating with the other, his girlfriend Danielle also trusted Christ. 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'

"For several years we have prayed for the salvation of one our member's daughters. Abby (now 20) was a committed atheist and lesbian. Over the past 6-7 months we have noticed an increasing interest in and attention to the Word. This past Lord's Day during our afternoon service Abby publicly

testified of the Lord's opening her heart to believe the gospel (Acts 16:14). For the first time she attended and participated in our prayer meeting this week. There are many more evident fruits. 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'

"A somewhat regular attender, Michael, has demonstrated greater attention to the Word both at services and his own private reading of the Scriptures. Recently a family that occasionally visited in the past has been coming again. A young man, Nate, who grew up Amish and then Mennonite, has also showed great interest in the Word. 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'

"By God's gracious provision over the last two months our building fund has increased from \$33,000 to \$82,897, almost 2/3 of the amount needed to purchase the building I told you about the last few months. Good progress has been made in that regard, and we trust the Lord for the remainder of the purchase price (closing date by March 16) and needed renovations (Matt 6:33; Phil 4:19). 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'

"I trust that sharing these very recent answers to prayer will encourage you that the Lord hears the prayers of his people offered in Christ's name and according to His will! May this encourage you to pray with greater trust and zeal! 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'

"Yours in Christ,  
Dan Greenfield  
Orwell Bible Church."

I received that email not long after having read Jonathan Edwards's *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighboring Towns and Villages*. Edwards published this work in 1736 to explain what had happened during the revivals of

1734-1735, the first fruits of the Great Awakening that the Lord gave our nation, especially our region of New England.

Let me read Edwards's description of the beginning of the revival:

"In the April following, anno 1734, there happened a very sudden and awful death of a young man in the bloom of his youth; who being violently seized with a pleurisy, and taken immediately very delirious, died in about two days; which (together with what was preached publicly on that occasion) much affected many young people. This was followed with another death of a young married woman, who had been considerably exercised in mind, about the salvation of her soul, before she was ill, and was in great distress in the beginning of her illness; but seemed to have satisfying evidences of God's mercy to her, before her death; so that she died very full of comfort, in a most earnest and moving manner warning and counselling others. This seemed to contribute to render solemn the spirits of many young persons; and there began evidently to appear more of a religious concern on people's minds."

It was under the influence of that preparation of the hearts of people that Edwards, himself only around 30 years old at the time, began a series of messages on justification by faith. His goal was not revival, per se, but to guard his flock from what he discerned to be a dangerous influence of Arminian doctrine in the region. God used the combination of this preparation and those messages to accomplish what Edwards could only describe as "A Surprising Work of God."

And so when I received the email news about Lydia's death in my friend Dan's church, I wondered what other surprises the Lord may have in store for our churches at this time. As I have studied the history of revival, having only scratched the surface at this point, this important truth has become clear to

me. When revival comes it does so to the surprise of those who are blessed by it, so much so that all they can do is exclaim, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." I want us to see three things about the surprise of revival this afternoon.

## I. The surprise of revival is scriptural.

Application: Clearly, if I am going to say that revival is surprising, I am going to have to show you in the Bible where it teaches this truth.

Mark 4:26-29: Revival is often depicted in agricultural terms in the Scripture. Seeds are sown, soil conditions are necessary, and the sheaves of a harvest are reaped when revival happens.

In our passage, Jesus seems to be emphasizing one special characteristic of a harvest like that – it is not produced by those casting seed into the ground. Clearly, casting seed is necessary, and Jesus would teach us to pray for laborers in the field willing not only to cast seed but to harvest white and ripened fields. But getting from seed to white field happens when the farmer sleeps, and in way that he does not even understand (v. 27). Earlier in the chapter, with the parable of the soils, Jesus teaches seed planters to expect different results. There too we learn that the best results are rare. The surprise of revival is scriptural.

Other passages of Scripture tell us about this surprise. In John 3 Jesus speaks of the work of the new birth as wind that bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and wither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (v. 8). In Eph. 3:20 Paul reminds us that we pray to the God who "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh within us." When revival comes, it will be beyond what we have asked for or thought of, just as so very many of our other answers to prayer are. Finally, in

1 Cor. 3:5-9 we are reminded of the necessary but minor role we play as ministers of the gospel in this work. The surprise of revival is scriptural.

II. The surprise of revival has been controversial.

Application: As you study the history of revival, you read about the ministries of both Calvinists and Arminians. At times, God moved men to exalt the doctrines of grace to correct a man-centered approach to this work that only God can do. At other times revival men pleaded with their Calvinist brothers to overcome their coldness toward the condition of sinners. Their Calvinism had justified their coldness.

Illustration: In his sermon titled, "Why Is God a Stranger in the Land?", the 19th century Scotsman, Robert Murray McCheyne, quotes from Edwards's *Faithful Narrative* to highlight the need of his own nation for revival, a nation whose Calvinist roots ran very deep, as did McCheyne's.

But in this sermon, he laments a noticeable difference between the newly saved and seasoned and educated ministers when it comes to a concern for lost souls: "When a sinner is newly converted, he would fain persuade everyone to come to Christ; the way is so plain, so easy, so precious. He thinks, Oh, if I were but a minister, how I would persuade men! This is a true feeling and a right feeling. But oh, how little is there of this among ministers!" When responding to a survey about the revival in his parish of Dundee, McCheyne spoke of how the Lord changed ministers in this regard and aided them "in declaring the terrors of the Lord, . . . and in setting forth the fullness and freeness of Christ as the Savior of sinners."

Both the First and Second Great Awakenings in our nation were dissipated in controversy. In the First Great Awakening, James Davenport emphasized separation and the purity of the church without a proper love for the brothers. He would come

to town, ask to interview the pastor of the church, decide whether he were born again (based often on whether he was allowed to preach in that church), and then lead a meeting advocating separation from the church if he were not satisfied. Not all Congregational separatists were like that, and many of our Baptist churches came from the separatist convictions of New Light converts of the first Great Awakening. But Davenport was extreme and divisive.

In the Second Great Awakening, Charles Finney emphasized certain methods and measures by which any minister of the gospel could produce a revival if he just did things correctly. Ian Murray's book discusses this history and rightly distinguishes between revival and revivalism. The first is a work of God. The second is something man can schedule and produce himself if he uses the right methods.

Both Davenport and Finney, after having seen the damage they had done, wrote *mea culpas* and apologies for their divisive approaches to gospel ministry. Finney would later distance himself from his apology, whereas Davenport seemed sincere.

Application: Remembering the surprise of revival will guard us from the mistakes made by these men. When we see that revival is a God-sent surprise, we will give Him proper glory for His work (1 Cor. 3:21, Eph. 3:21). And when we see that revival is a God-sent surprise, we will see how needy we are for it and deprived without it. The apostle Paul was both the greatest theologian and the greatest evangelist the church has ever known. His theology caused him to live with what he calls both his "great heaviness and continual sorrow in [his] heart" (Rom. 9:2) and his "heart's desire and prayer to God" (Rom. 10:1), namely that lost ones would be saved.

And so we need Paul's balance. We must see that revival is God's work without letting that truth make us indifferent about the needs of sinners.

III. The surprise of revival is unusual.

Application: Surprises are surprising because they are unusual.

Illustration: In 1832 Ebenezer Porter was the President of Andover Seminary, which had been founded in 1808 as a reaction against apostasy at Harvard. He had lived through the Second Great Awakening, and he organized a series of lectures on revival that he delivered to seminary in that year.

In the third of these lectures, Porter focused on hindrances to revival, and as he began that lecture he said something that encouraged my heart: "It cannot be doubted, that there is sometimes a sovereign withdrawal of divine influence from a church, when no special reason is apparent to us why it should be so, at that time rather than another."

Paul encourages young Timothy with some of his last words on earth: "Preach the Word. Be instant in season and out of season. . . . for the time [season] will come when they will not endure sound doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:1-5). The study of revival is the study of unusual times of blessing. We may or may not be called to seasons like that. It may be that we are called to out-of-season times and places. But whatever season we find ourselves called to, our duty is the same - preach the Word and do the work of the evangelist. Who knows but that the Lord may have some surprising seasons ahead for us?

Conclusion: Perhaps someday we will find ourselves writing about a surprising work of God in our ministry the way Jonathan Edwards did of his: "And the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more

and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ. From day to day for many months together, might be seen evident instances of sinners brought out of darkness into marvelous light, and delivered our of an horrible pit, and from the miry clay, and set upon a rock, with a new song of praise to God in their mouths . . .

“It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought to them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands. The doings of God were then seen in His sanctuary. God’s day was a delight, and His tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was alive in God’s service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.” Edwards goes on. I must stop here.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*