

Text: Luke 18:15-27

Title: "The possibility of revival"

Time: 3/13/2021 am; 5/1/2022 am; 8/14/2022 am

Place: Hill Village Bible Church; Bible Baptist Church, New Hartford, NY; NBBC

Introduction: What makes Christian revivals possible is an important question for local churches as well as historians. That a despised and persecuted sect triumphed over the Roman Empire is traceable to the revivals of the third-century persecuted church. The agnostic historian, E. R. Dodds, wrote a book titled, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, in an effort to explain this history in human terms.

As the title of his book suggests, he begins by saying that beginning with the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, the glory days of the Roman Empire, called the *Pax Romana*, were declining. Aurelius was a philosopher-emperor who came to power in A.D. 160, and he wrote of the senselessness of the human condition in his pagan society.

Dodds explains: "As the earth is a pinpoint in infinite space, so the life of man is a pinpoint in infinite time, a knife-edge between two eternities . . . His activities are 'smoke and nothingness'; his prizes are 'a bird flying past, vanished before we can grasp it'. The clash of armies is 'the quarrel of puppies over a bone'; the pomp of Marcus's own Samaritan triumph is the self-satisfaction of a spider which has caught a fly. For Marcus this is not empty rhetoric: it is a view of the human condition, and it is meant in deadly earnest" (p. 8). This pessimism and loss of faith in purpose is where paganism leads, and it is where many find themselves in our day.

A century into this malaise, the Christian church comes under severe persecution beginning with the Emperor Decius in A. D. 249 and intensifying under Diocletian and Galerius. During this time, the church gained rapidly in numbers, and

the historian Dodds tries to explain how that was possible. He mentions the weakness of paganism and the courage of Christians in the face of persecution as important factors.

And then he notes that certain characteristics of the Christianity of that time were important to its victory: (1) "In the first place, its very exclusiveness, its refusal to concede any value to alternative forms of worship, which nowadays is often felt to be a weakness, was in the circumstances of the time a source of strength." (2) "Secondly, Christianity was open to all. In principle, it made no social distinctions." (3) "Thirdly, in a period when earthly life was increasingly devalued and guilt-feelings were widely prevalent, Christianity held out to the disinherited the conditional promise of a better inheritance in another world." (4) "But lastly, the benefits of becoming a Christian were not confined to the next world. A Christian congregation was from the first a community in a much fuller sense than any corresponding group" (pp. 132-136).

I am struck, as I read that explanation of what made possible Christianity's advance in third-century Rome, that this list of causes is the same list that ought to characterize us in our day and age. What Dodds fails to understand, of course, is that Christianity becomes all those things through a supernatural work of God, not a natural work of man. It happens through revival among believers.

This morning we are going to think about the possibility of revival with the help of the Lord's instruction to his disciples after his conversation with the rich young ruler. They ask the Lord a closely related question in verse 26 of our chapter, "Who then can be saved?" Our question, "Is revival possible?" is really the same question.

I want us to focus on two truths in the passage - (1) what prompts the question, and (2) what answers the question.

I. What prompts the question, “Who then can be saved?” (vv. 18-26).

Illustration: Luke, the author of this Gospel, was a physician, and physicians know how to thread and use needles. We have a veterinarian in our church who has his own needles for sewing up animal incisions. He came to church once with a bandage around his eye. He had been hunting, and after firing a shot the scope of his gun kicked back and sliced his skin around his eye. Bleeding, Mark went home, pulled out his needle, looked in the mirror, and sewed himself up.

Application: Jesus mentions the eye of a needle. There is an interpretation of this needle that arose in the fifteenth century, which claimed that this needle was a small portal in the wall of a city for the use of pedestrians. If a camel kneeled down, he might scooch through one of those successfully. But sewing needles were common devices in NT homes, and the physician Luke actually refers to a surgical needle in this passage, using a different word for *needle* than the other Gospels (see ZPEB, 4.401-402). What prompts the question is very simply the large size of camels, and the small size of a needle’s eye.

So, Jesus’s point is that when we are talking about someone being saved, we are talking about something that is impossibly difficult. And in this context, He is focused on one of the things that makes saving a sinner impossibly difficult.

(1) Riches make saving a sinner impossibly difficult (vv. 24-25). I believe the rich young ruler of this passage would have sold everything he had and given it to the poor to be able to live the life I am living. I also believe that I would not want to lower myself to live the life the rich young ruler had to live.

Think of the technologies, conveniences, comforts, luxuries, and pleasures we experience that the rich young ruler could have never imagined possible. We go to the bread isle at a

grocery store, and the number of choices before us is astounding. And we have not even made it to the store bakery yet. And then to think that this is just the bread isle, and then to remember that grocery stores are everywhere we go. If riches caused an impossible difficulty when it comes to the salvation of this rich young ruler, it does at least that in my life and your life and in the lives of everyone we know.

I would like to mention two other things in this category not mentioned by Jesus in our passage.

(2) Show business makes saving a sinner impossibly difficult (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Illustration: My youngest son bought me a book for Christmas titled, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. It was written by Neil Postman, a New York University English professor, whom I do not believe was a Christian.

The book describes the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, one of which took place on August 21, 1858 in Ottawa, IL. Douglas spoke first for one hour; Lincoln gave a rebuttal for an hour and a half; and then Douglas finished with a half hour.

The funny thing about this 3-hour debate format was that it was a condensed version of what was typical in public discourse. On October 16, 1854, the two men had met in opposition in Peoria, IL. Douglas gave a three-hour address with the agreement that Lincoln would get the same amount of time to reply. They would still not be done after Lincoln, awaiting another reply from Douglas. In the middle of this session, Lincoln suggested that they all take a break for supper, which they did, and remarkably they all returned for the finish.

Citizens in Ottawa and Peoria in the 19th century lived in a culture that understood the importance of listening to a lot of

content, and they could listen well. Today, our political debates are staged visual extravaganzas with each participant hoping to utter the one-liner that will entertain the audience the most. People find verbal content less tolerable today.

Application: Paul talked about these days, as did Ezekiel. You will remember that God told Ezekiel to preach to dry bones (they had no ears), and He told Paul to be instant in season and out of season, because seasons like this would come.

Postman goes on to explain that before the invention of the telegraph (1837), information could travel no faster than a human being could, about the speed of a locomotive, or about 35 miles an hour. Today, information travels instantaneously at 5G speeds. Postman says the reason people could listen to the Lincoln/Douglas debates was that they had been living in an age of exposition.

More and more, we are living in what Postman calls an age of showbusiness. Because information travels as fast as it does, we have many more topics to digest, and our brains have been wired to not spend too much time with any one of them because we cannot do much about them anyway. Most of the problems and causes you find on Twitter you cannot solve or fully understand; you can only retweet.

And so in our age, show business makes saving a sinner through the sound doctrine of the gospel impossibly difficult.

(3) Rock-n-roll makes saving a sinner impossibly difficult (Ps. 40:1-3).

Illustration: I was recently listening to an interview of the popular and highly respected financial advisor Dave Ramsey, whose radio show is syndicated on over 500 stations nationwide. Ramsey has taught his listeners that when someone asks us how we are doing, we should say, "Better than I deserve."

That is a great line, and I am sure that Mr. Ramsey is a godly man who is growing in grace.

This particular interview had a heart-breaking feature, however, that I think is another evidence of the impossible difficulty we face today as we ask, "Who then can be saved?" The one conducting the interview was a well-known and well-respected evangelical pastor of a large church, and he finished his interview with Ramsey with a series of rapid-fire questions. The second question was, "What is your favorite rock band from the 1980s?" Ramsey's answer was, "The Eagles, but you have to go back to the 70s for them."

Application: I was a teenager in the 1970s, and rock music was a powerful temptation in my battle with sin in those days. Songs like the Eagles' "Hotel California" and "Take It Easy" were influences I had to resist if I wanted to grow in Christ then, and I still must today.

The Spirit that will bring revival when it comes is the Holy Spirit. But we are dealing with a situation today in which, just like the speed of information has wired us to not endure sound doctrine, the ubiquitous and omnipresent sounds of pop music have wired us to no longer enjoy the new song the Psalmist is talking about in this passage, the one designed so that many will see it and hear it and then trust in the Lord.

The exclusiveness of our Christianity, which was so powerful in the third-century revivals, has been entirely lost by much of the church today due largely to the influence of rock-n-roll.

And so, these are three things that make the salvation of sinners impossibly difficult in our day, prompting the questions, "Who then can be saved?" and "Is revival possible?" Perhaps you can think of many others.

II. What answers the question – “Who then can be saved?” (v. 27).

Application: The answer to the question, “Who then can be saved?”, and to the question, “Is revival possible?”, is the same.

The answer Jesus gives is twofold – with man this is impossible; with God all things are possible. We must remember both answers in our preaching and praying, in season and out of season. This twofold truth was recognized even by Dr. Gamaliel in the book of Acts, “And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to naught: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God” (Acts 5:38-39).

As you study the history of revival, you find not that men figured out some new way of doing things, or that they instituted a better program, or that they finally found a leader who would lead them to the promised land. What you find is that God decided to do something extraordinary, and that something often begins with the removal of things like riches, showbusiness, and rock-n-roll from the lives of God’s people.

Many revivals were among Calvinists, whose emphasis on the sovereignty of God in His work of salvation gave them an orientation in their gospel ministry that is different than what is typical in our churches today. We wonder what we can do better to reach people; these men wondered what they could do to please God more, to become more readily useful in the Lord’s eyes for a work that only God can do. Revival is possible, even in our day, but it is possible only for God, not man.

Conclusion: For only God can turn a sinner loving his riches, enamored with his show business, enchanted by his rock-n-roll, and infected with every other love of the world that is

keeping him from the kingdom of heaven into a simple child of faith (Luke 18:15-17).

Our nation saw its last Great Awakening shortly after the invention of the telegraph. If we see another, it will have little to do with the capabilities of man-made modern technology. The Holy Spirit does the work of revival, but He must not be grieved nor quenched. When we seek to please men and begin to depend on the inventions of men, not God and His inventions, we become caught in the traps of impurity (Mark 8:15), disunity (Mark 9:17-42), and counterfeiting (Acts 8:9-13, 18-24), all the destroyers of revival.

When you and I finally take hold of Jesus's twofold answer to the question, "Is revival possible?", that revival is impossible for man and only possible for God, we will stop asking ourselves what pleases man and start concerning ourselves intently for the sake of sinners with what pleases God.

"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*