



IS THERE A BALM IN GILEAD?

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GRACE PRATT MORRIS-CHAPMAN, METHODIST MISSION PARTNER IN UGANDA, CHALLENGES US, AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A CHURCH, TO ENGAGE ACTIVELY WITH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AS PART OF OUR PATTERN OF DISCIPLESHIP IF WE ARE TO SEE OUR LIVES AND OUR CHURCHES TRANSFORMED.

One of the great malaises of the church is this strange tendency, gradually and subtly, to lose our fervour or passion. Slowly but steadily, as though somehow not in control of ourselves, we slip into some sort of stupor, all the while thinking that all is well. We become comfortable, self-assured and settled in our church life, lacking passion and, though appearing healthy, remain fruitless. We congratulate ourselves for the great accomplishments of our churches, for all the good we are doing and all the innovative styles of worship and mission we have produced and all the while we are dying within, running out of power and becoming

insignificant to the world around us. Is there a balm in Gilead for this sort of malaise? Churches are frantically investing time and resources in all kinds of remedies, balms which for a while soothe but offer no lasting solution.

In the book of Jeremiah, we read of how the people of Judah had gradually fallen into a state of apathy towards the Lord and his word. We read of the futility of the various solutions the people of God turned to in order to save themselves from the consequences of separation from the Lord. For a while these solutions worked, but ultimately they failed, for that which was troubling them had no cure. There was One to whom they could have turned in order to be restored, but they sought him not.

In Jeremiah 8 there is a heart-wrenching cry in response to the state in which the people of God were living - they had lost their passion, living as though all was well. The leaders who should have corrected the people treated "the wound of my people as though it were not serious" (Jeremiah 8:11). God's people had turned away from him who had done such wondrous things for

them out of his great love for them, and exchanged the life-giving covenant the Lord had made with them for the gods and the practices of the peoples among whom they lived. The book of Jeremiah speaks of the physical and spiritual consequences of their actions; they had set in motion the infliction of wounds for which they would find no remedy. The prophet's deep pain and sorrow, and indeed that of God too for these were his beloved people, is expressed in these words: 'Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?' (Jeremiah 8: 21-22).

There was a balm (ointment) produced in Gilead which was renowned for its healing properties, but there was no source of healing or recovery for what was to come upon the people. So it is for the Church today: our present condition requires much more than the fancy dressings we have been treating ourselves with.

Scripture and church history are punctuated with breathtaking accounts

of certain moves of the Spirit of God which brought new life to the people of God, changing lives way beyond the borders of the places where these acts of divine grace took place. Think for a moment about the impact of the move of God through the Welsh Revivals, through the lives of John and Charles Wesley, the Azusa Street Revival of 1906-1908, and the East African revival of the 1930s. They all took place during chapters of the church's life when people had settled for having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof. It is the particular role of the Spirit to invade our seasons of rot, decay and stupor, stirring us up again, leading us to rediscover our first love, granting us a renewed commitment and passion for the Lord.

A LIFE-GIVING GIFT

Some of the amazing gifts of the grace of God to his people are the disciplines of the Christian life - prayer, confession, worship, service, submission, fasting, silence and solitude, the study of Scripture, meditation and so on. The role of these disciplines in the disciple's life is to lead one into a way of life which centres firmly on being under the gaze of the Lord - under the transformative gaze of the Spirit. It is a way of life which yearns, above all, to dwell in the presence of the Lord and to be in constant communion with Him. This may seem impossible to some, or may be considered available only to a select few, but the truth is that all can live in close communion with the living Lord.

It is interesting to note that a key distinguishing feature of the lives of the people associated with the stories of the great revivals in church history is the role of the spiritual disciplines in their growth as disciples. Most especially, it is the fact that the disciplines were crucial in the enduring nature of the fruit they bore.

It is well documented that the atmosphere in which revivals have sprung up have been characterised by a pursuit of God, a raw yearning for God, a longing to be more like Christ Jesus and the desire to please him. These are exactly what the disciplines produce in the disciple. Under the guidance of the Spirit, (and

this is crucial, in that without the Spirit, the disciplines are useless - they have no power of their own) the disciplines produce an overwhelming awareness of the love of God, an acute awareness of the gravity of sin, prompting deep remorse and repentance, an insatiable hunger and thirst for God, driven by an unrestrained pursuit of and an ever-deepening love for the Lord. This is accompanied by the desire to serve his kingdom purpose wholeheartedly.

The purpose of the spiritual disciplines is the transformation of the disciple's whole life. To borrow the words of the Apostle Paul, it is the putting off of the 'old self' in order that we may become more and more like Christ Jesus, having our thinking, feelings, desires, priorities, hopes and dreams, (in fact all that we are) renewed, in order that we may grow increasingly in tune with the kingdom purposes of God. This is an ongoing process, a daily experience which requires the disciple's wholehearted surrender. It is quite clear from the stories of revival which have been told and retold that it is in this position of submission and surrender to God that revival is experienced.

The disciplines have the purpose of kindling 'the flame of sacred love' in the disciple's heart and in the life of churches, reinvigorating communities of believers and energising their witness. Thus, there is a unifying effect and a missional impact accompanying the transformative encounter with God through his Spirit.

Could it be that the current malaise of disunity and decline is pointing the finger at the lack of genuine openness to this life-giving gift of God? Could it be that the root of our growing insignificance in society has something to do with the fact that we have rejected the fountain of living water and been too busy digging our own cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:13)? Through the gracious gift of the disciplines of the spiritual life we experience that fresh bubbling spring of living water within which will refresh us personally, revive our churches and empower our witness (John 4:14).



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UNWRAPPING THE GIFT

The life of the disciple involves the daily unwrapping of the riches of God's grace under the guidance of the Spirit. After Pentecost we read of the incredible acts of the Spirit through the apostles. The dramatic encounter with the Spirit begins the unfurling of their ministry. We read of beautiful unity, generosity, devotion to the Scriptures, teaching, prayer and fasting, the bold declaration of the gospel, the performing of miracles and the daily addition of new believers. Pentecost set them ablaze for such a world-changing purpose that, even after many millennia, their story is still bearing fruit.

So it was, with the 'greats' of the world-changing revivals which continue to inspire us today. It was by the infilling of the Spirit that they were enabled to be disciples of Christ and accomplish wondrous things in his name. They served the purpose of God in their day and we today are beneficiaries of their legacy.

We will never truly experience the fullness of all that God has purposed for us without the Holy Spirit. Our role as disciples is the daily discipline of submitting to the activity of the Spirit of God in our lives.

Could it be that the decline we see in the Church today is a result of the lack of openness and submission to the Spirit? Some may argue that the issue maybe more to do with the lack of effective biblical teaching and ineffective discipleship programmes. However, the fact remains that without the Holy Spirit, all our efforts, no matter how brilliant and well meaning, are lifeless, powerless and fruitless.

WHAT THEN SHALL WE DO?

Scripture assures that if we draw near to the Lord, he will in turn draw near to us. If we seek him with all our hearts and turn to him in repentance and faith there is no limit to what the Lord can do in and through us by his Spirit. The Lord in his grace has shown us how we can draw close to him; it is no secret, and it is a gift waiting to be unwrapped. Discipleship is an open invitation from the living Lord to each one of us to participate in his kingdom purposes.

Our Lord Jesus Christ modelled for us what it meant to be totally submitted to God and to desire that his kingdom comes and that his will is done. God has made his very presence available to us by his Spirit. All that remains for us to do is to be radically, ruthlessly open to him, to his word and his will. What comes out of that is in his hands, but we can be assured that it will be way beyond what we could ever imagine or comprehend.

Are we ready to see churches revived ... the gospel being preached with boldness, accompanied by miracles ... new communities of faith blossoming everywhere ...? May the Spirit of the Lord fall afresh on us and set us ablaze for his glory. May our hearts cry be:

*'Lord, send revival, start with me,
 For I am one of unclean lips
 And my eyes have seen the King
 Your glory I have glimpsed
 Send revival, start with me'
 (Matt Redman)*

Grace Pratt Morris-Chapman is a Local Preacher and Methodist Mission Partner working in Uganda. Grace is one of the guest speakers at the MET REVIVE National Gathering from 17-19 November 2023. For more information and to book, visit methodistevangelicals.org.uk/revive

