

Revival Stories: Charles Finney

by E.A. Johnston

Revival is a sovereign work of God that transforms the life of the church and the community, and it is essential for the life of the church.

Duration: 18:36

Scripture: Genesis 19:12-14, Genesis 19:16-17, Genesis 19:24-25, Genesis 19:29, Matthew 24:16-18, Luke 17:28-30

Topics: "Biography"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher describes a powerful and transformative experience he had while preaching to a congregation. Suddenly, a solemn atmosphere descended upon the people, and they began falling to their knees and crying out for mercy. The preacher was overwhelmed by a discordant sound that seemed to drive him to desperation. After praying fervently, he was inspired to deliver a message of warning and urgency, calling for a heaven-sent revival to awaken the church from its spiritual slumber. The preacher references biblical figures like John Wesley and the prophet Joel to emphasize the need for a revival and the importance of recognizing the moral decay of the present time.

Transcript

Well, our subject today in our series of revival stories is Charles Finney. Charles Finney was an attorney from New York who had a dramatic conversion experience, and it so radically altered his course in life that the next day, he called on all the clients of his law firm and told them he could no longer work for them, for he had become a Christian, and now he had to go to work for Jesus Christ. He walked away from his law practice that very day.

Finney wrote that a revival presupposes a falling away, and he was correct in that statement, for a true revival of religion restores a people of God to a right relationship with God, and it infuses a church with New Testament vitality. Vance Habner once said, everybody is holding revivals these days, it's about time somebody let loose a one. Well, the term revival in your day and mine has come to mean a series of meetings where evangelism is performed, where there's much excitement with loud singing and loud praying and loud preaching, but after these revival meetings end, there is little change to the local church or community.

On the other hand, a true revival of religion transforms the life of the church and alters the moral makeup of a community. Evangelism is something we do for God. Revival is something God does for us.

We cannot drum up revival through our own efforts. Revival is sent by a sovereign God. This is seen in the comments made by my late mentor, Dr. Stephen Offord, who wrote the foreword to my first book on revival, *Realities of Revival*.

Stephen Offord had seen God move in revival in his own powerful ministry. In particular was the famous campus revival at Wheaton College, where a young Stephen Offord was the preacher, and God visited that campus in a dramatic way. Stephen Offord understood what real revival was.

Listen to his comments from this foreword. I am forcefully reminded of an expository sermon on revival I heard from the lips of the great Dr. G. Campbell Morgan during my theological studies in London, England many years ago. What the doctor had to say has helped me to understand how God and man come together in this holy business of praying down revival from heaven.

Let me paraphrase what I heard and remember. Revival is a sovereign work of God. Jesus declared, Only God can command the revival wind, but we must set ourselves to catch that wind when God blows.

There you have it. We cannot produce revival, but we can ready ourselves to receive it when it comes. Dr. Offord was right.

Revival is heaven-sent. The church in America, friends, sleeps the sleep of death, and only a heaven-sent revival can awaken her from her spiritual stupor. The cry of our desperate hour in these last days is drowned out by a snoring church.

It has put herself to sleep through much zealous activity until she is worn out. All this activity is performed by the church in the West and is done in the name of Christ, but without the Spirit of Christ. Never before in the history of the world has the church slept through such an hour of crisis as we face today.

I repeat, only a heaven-sent revival can awaken her. Therefore, we must say with the prophet Joel, Men in previous generations knew the need of the hour of the time in which they lived. John Wesley knew full well the moral decay of London in his day before God sent a revival of religion to awaken the nation under the preaching of Wesleyan Whitefield.

John Wesley said this, he said, Give me one hundred men who fear nothing but God and hate nothing but sin, and I will shake the gates of hell. And he did just that. Well, as we study our subject today in our revival stories on Charles Finney, we'll see that Finney was used of God during the second great awakening in America.

And we will hear firsthand his account where he was preaching when this heaven-sent revival came. The year was 1824 and he was in New York in a little community. We'll listen to his words.

I must now give some account of my labors and their results at Antwerp, a village north of Evans Mills. I arrived there the first time in April and found that no religious services of any kind were held in that town. I very soon learned that there was a Presbyterian church in that place, consistent of but few members.

They had some years before tried to keep up a meeting at the village on the Sabbath, but one of the elders who conducted their Sabbath meeting lived about five miles out of the village and was obliged in approaching the village to pass through a Universalist settlement. The Universalists had broken up their village meeting by rendering it impossible for Deacon Randall, as they called him, to get through their village and get to the meeting. They would even take off the wheels of his carriage.

And finally, they carried their opposition so far that he gave up attending the meetings at the village and all religious services at the village, as far as I could learn, were relinquished altogether. In passing around the village, I heard a vast amount of profanity. I thought I had never heard so much in any place I've ever visited.

It seemed as if the men, in playing ball upon the green and in every business place that I stepped into, were all cursing and swearing and damning each other. I felt as if I had arrived upon the borders of hell. I had a kind of awful feeling.

I recollect as I passed around the village on Saturday, the very atmosphere seemed to me to be poisoned and a kind of terror took possession of me. I gave myself to prayer on Saturday and finally urged my petition till this answer came. Be not afraid to speak, and hold not thy peace, for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee, for I have much people in this city.

This completely relieved me of all fear. I found, however, that the Christian people there were really afraid that something serious might happen if religious meetings were established in that place again. On the third Sabbath, I preached there, and an aged man came to me as I came out of the pulpit and asked me if I would go and preach in a schoolhouse in his neighborhood, saying that they had never had any services there.

He told me that it was about three miles in a certain direction. He wished me to come as soon as I could. I appointed the next day, Monday, at five o'clock in the afternoon.

It was a warm day. I left my horse at the village, and I thought I would walk down so that I should have no trouble in calling along on the people in the neighborhood of the schoolhouse on my way. However, before I got to the place, having labored so hard on the Sabbath, I found myself very much exhausted and sat down by the way and felt as if I could scarcely proceed.

I blamed myself for not having taken my horse. When I arrived at the appointed hour, I found the schoolhouse full. I could only get a standing place near the door, which stood open, and the windows were all open.

I read a hymn, and I cannot call it singing, for they seemed never to have had any church music in that place before. However, they pretended to sing, but it amounted to about this. Each one bawled in his own way.

My ears had been cultivated by teaching church music, and their horrible discord distressed me so much that at first I thought I must go out. I finally put both hands over my ears and held them with the full strength of my arms, but this did not shut out the discords. I held my head down over my knees with my hands on my ears and shook my head and tried as far as possible to get rid of the horrible discords that seemed almost to make me mad.

I stood it, however, until they were through, and then I cast myself down on my knees, almost in a state of desperation, and began to pray. The Lord opened the windows of heaven, and the spirit of prayer was poured out, and I let my whole heart out in prayer. I have taken no thought with regard to a text upon which to preach, but waited to see the congregation, as I was in the habit of doing in those days, before I selected a text.

As soon as I had done praying, I arose from my knees and said, Up, get ye out of this place, for the Lord will destroy this city. I said I did not recollect where the text was, but I told them very nearly where they could find it, and then went on to explain it. I said that there was such a man as Abraham, and also who he was, and that there was such a man as Lot, and who he was.

They're relations to each other. They're separating from each other on account of differences between their herdmen, and that Abraham took the hill country, and Lot settled in the vale of Sodom. I then told them how exceedingly wicked Sodom became, and what abominable practices they fell into.

I told them that the Lord decided to destroy Sodom, and visited Abraham, and informed him what he was about to do, that Abraham prayed to the Lord to spare Sodom if he found so many righteous there, and the Lord promised to do so for their sakes, that then Abraham besought him to save it for a certain less number, and the Lord said he would spare it for their sakes, that he kept on reducing the number until he reduced the number of righteous persons to ten, and God promised him that if he found ten righteous persons in the city, he would spare it. Abraham made no further request, and Jehovah left him. But it was found that there was but one righteous person there, and that was Lot, Abraham's nephew, and the man said to Lot, Hath thou here any besides, son-in-law, and thy sons, and thy daughters, and whatsoever thou hast in the city, bring them out of this place, for we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxing great before the face of the Lord, and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it.

And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons-in-law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get ye out of this place, for the Lord will destroy the city. But it seemed as one that mocked unto his sons-in-law. Well, while I was relating these facts, I observed the people looked as if they were angry.

Many of the men were in their shirtsleeves, and they looked at each other and at me as if they were ready to pitch into me and chastise me for something on the spot. I saw their strange and unaccountable looks, and could not understand what I was saying that had offended them. However, it seemed to me that their anger arose higher and higher as I continued the narrative.

As soon as I had finished the narrative, I turned upon them and said that I understood that they never had a religious meeting in that place, and that, therefore, I had a right to take it for granted and was compelled to take it for granted that they were an ungodly people. I pressed that home upon them with more and more energy, with my heart full to bursting. I had not spoken to them in this strain of direct application, I should think, more than a quarter of an hour, when all at once an awful solemnity seemed to settle down upon them, and a some kind of thing flashed over the congregation, a kind of shimmering as if there was some agitation in the very atmosphere itself.

The congregation began to fall from their seats, and they fell in every direction, and cried for mercy. If I had had a sword in each hand, I could not have cut them off their seats as fast as they fell. Indeed, nearly the whole congregation were either on their knees or prostrate, I should think, in less than two minutes from this first shock that fell upon them.

Everyone prayed for himself, who was able to speak at all. I, of course, was obliged to stop preaching, for they no longer paid any attention to me. When I went down the second time, I got an explanation of the anger manifested by the congregation during the introduction of my first sermon there.

I learned that the place was called Sodom, but I knew it not, and that there was one pious man in the place, and him they called Lot. This was the old man that invited me there. The people supposed I had

chosen my subject and preached to them in that manner, because they were so wicked as to be called Sodom.

This was a striking coincidence, but as far as I was concerned, it was altogether accidental. I have not been in that place for many years. A few years since I was laboring in Syracuse in the state of New York, two gentlemen called upon me one day, one quite an elderly man, another perhaps a man of forty-seven years of age.

The younger man introduced the older one to me as Deacon White, an elder in his church saying that he had called on me to give a hundred dollars to Oberlin College. The older man in his turn introduced the younger saying, This is my minister, the Reverend Mr. Cross. He was converted under your ministry.

Whereupon Brother Cross said to me, Do you remember preaching at such a time in Antwerp and in such a part of the town in a schoolhouse in the afternoon and that such a scene, describing it, occurred there? I said, I remember it very well and can never forget it. Will I remember anything? Well, said he, I was then but a young man and was converted in that meeting. That young man has been a successful minister for many years.

Well, friends, I pray that this story of Charles Fanny being used in revival during the Second Awakening has stirred your hearts to pray for revival. Oh, friends, we need a mighty revival to come to America today. Please get down on your faces and pray that God will be pleased to raise up some men to pray and preach that he can use as his human instruments to send revival to our land again today.

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