

# The Laws of Revival

by James Burns

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*A revival is a movement of spiritual awakening and renewal that brings about a deep sense of sin and guilt, followed by confession, repentance, and a wonderful outburst of joy and spiritual fervor.*

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 51:10, Isaiah 55:6, Acts 2:46, James 4:8

**Topics:** "Revival Movement", "Spiritual Renewal"

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## Description

James Burns preaches about the profound impact of revivals in the history of Christianity, emphasizing how they awaken individuals and communities to spiritual realities, leading to repentance, salvation, and a renewed sense of joy and purpose. Revivals spread rapidly, revealing God's active presence and guidance in human history. Each revival movement brings about a swift and widespread awakening, a deep sense of sin and conviction, a reformation within the church, a joyful outburst of forgiveness and renewal, and a lasting positive influence on society.

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## Transcript

In the history of Christianity, no phenomenon is more apparent than the recurrence of revivals. At certain intervals there sweeps over certain geographical areas a passion of repentance. Large numbers of persons who have been dead or indifferent to spiritual realities then become intensely awakened to them. They are arrested in the midst of their worldly occupations and suddenly seized by a terror of wrongdoing. Fear of an impending doom haunts their minds. Flinging all else aside, they earnestly seek a way of escape and cry out for salvation.

These movements, when once begun, spread with amazing rapidity. They pervade the atmosphere like a contagion and burst out in unexpected places as if carried by unseen hands. Frequently these movements are local and limited in their area, but sometimes they sweep over whole countries and produce the most momentous results. Certainly no history of the growth of the Christian church that ignored the constant recurrence and the enormous influence of revivals would be complete in its value.

Revivals are a witness to us of the supremacy in this world of spiritual realities and to divine working in human history. They are an encouragement to faith because they reveal that God is active in the realm of our spiritual experience and in guiding His church. They declare that God does not sit unmindful of His creation but that He is ceaselessly operating for the world's good and for the salvation of His people.

In each movement of revival there is something incalculable. Vast energies are awakened and new forces burst into being. Revival's tide rolls in from an unseen continent and moves with a gathering momentum that nothing can resist. Yet, while there is in each revival something distinct, there is also in each something uniform.

First, each revival is characterized by the extraordinary swiftness with which it spreads. Revivals burst out in places where there seems to have been no evident contact with other infected places, and men are moved by it not in twos and threes but in multitudes. Thus, revivals show how the Spirit of God is ever active, and how, even in the dark winter of man's religious experience, there is the promise and potential of spring.

For example, the nailing of the theses by Luther on the church door at Wittenberg seemed to suggest little of importance, but it was as a tiny flame set to a vast combustible material, and the fire begun that day has never been put out. Knox, as he went up and down Scotland, was amazed at the changes he saw wrought--in a few years the Lowlands of Scotland were so altered as almost to become unrecognizable.

And it was so in England under Wesley. Nothing seemed to indicate any startling change in the life of the country as Wesley stood in the open air, in the month of February 1739, to address a crowd of illiterate miners near Bristol. Yet it was the beginning of a movement that spread like wildfire and that laid the foundations of Methodism, which was destined to become one of the largest Protestant denominations in the world.

Second, every revival movement sees an awakening of a deep sense of sin in the individual and in the church. In the intense spiritual light shed abroad by the Holy Spirit, the sin and guilt of the awakened soul stand out in terrifying blackness. Not only are their cardinal sins laid bare in all their hideousness, but the convicted see themselves as God sees them. Their sins drag them to judgment. They cry out in their despair, and an awful terror seizes them. Under the pressure of the Spirit, they often fall to the ground with loud cries and tears. The conviction of sin burns them like fire.

Under the pressure of this agony of conviction, men openly confess their sins. They go through the long and terrible catalog, hiding nothing. Their one intense longing is to cast their sins forever from them and to be brought into reconciliation and peace with God. "I simply cannot describe the scene," says one who recently passed through such an experience in Manchuria. "It made one think of the Judgment Day. God had come among us. All knew it, and every heart was open before Him. For myself, I had the most intense realization of the holiness of God, and of my uncleanness in His sight."

At such times a similar conviction of sin falls upon the church. In lax times the dulled conscience of the church permits many things to creep within her doors that, if they are not wrong in themselves, at least tend to dull the fine edge of her spiritual life. When the inner fires cease to glow with intense love for Christ, there is nothing left to defend the church from a worldly spirit that enters with its hatred of all spiritual earnestness and enthusiasm. Divisions arise, harmony between minister and people is rent, or there is a lowering of the spiritual tone, which reduces worship to coldness and formality. Practices are permitted in order to maintain people's interest that are an exact copy of the world without, and although many condemn these compromises, they have not the power to eject them. The church becomes at such a time worldly, selfish, and almost Christless.

With a revival, however, all this is changed. The church's long defection ends. A new consciousness of sin is awakened in the church as well as in the individual. She realizes how far she has wandered, how untrue

she has been to her divine Head, how little glory she has given Him. There passes over her a wave of deep conviction and shame. She humbles herself in the dust, and in deep humility she confesses her false witness, her worldly practices, and her indifference to the spiritual needs of those around her.

Revival of this kind is often followed by a time of reformation when the evil practices that have been permitted are dragged out and condemned. Turning with joyful heart to spiritual things, the church seeks to bring the lost into the Kingdom of Christ through united prayer, bold witness, and a sacrificial spirit. This reformation of the church is not attained with dramatic suddenness. Rather, it follows the admission into the church of those large masses affected by the revival and the fresh life poured into the hearts of its members.

Third, revival produces a wonderful outburst of joy. When the agony of conviction, the awful sense of abandonment, and the grief and terror of sin are passed, there breaks upon the heart the blessed peace of forgiveness. No joy that earth has to offer can compare with this mysterious gladness that awakens in the heart forgiven and restored. Men have exhausted language trying to find for it a worthy expression. At such a time, the splendid imagery of Isaiah--that the mountains and hills break forth into singing and all the trees of the field clap their hands--does not appear excessive. To those caught in the flood of joy, all the world seems changed. Their hearts are light and their faces glow. Like those of the early church, they "eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46).

Nor is this joy limited to those who have been newly converted. It fills the hearts of those who are already avowed followers of Christ. It sweeps with its radiant life into the church and makes all its worship pulse and glow with spiritual fervor. Dr. Dale, describing the effect produced by Moody and Sankey at the close of their first mission in Birmingham, England, which produced the deepest impression on the life of the city and its churches, says:

I hardly know how to describe the change which has passed over them [i.e., the members of his church]. It is like the change which comes upon a landscape where clouds which have been hanging over it for hours suddenly vanish, and the sunlight seems to fill both heaven and earth. There is a joyousness and elasticity of spirit, and a hopefulness which have completely transformed them.

This is the effect of a revival wherever it appears. It irradiates the atmosphere and leaves in its place numberless happy men and women whose faces are aglow with a new light and whose hearts throb with an intense joy. One of the characteristic outlets of this newborn gladness is an outburst of song. Song is the natural expression of the jubilant heart. It is human nature's way of escape for feelings that are too rapturous to keep silent. Most of the great leaders of revival have been poets as well, and the revival is borne along on the wings of exulting praise.

Fourth, all revivals profoundly affect large masses of the community. They leave a permanent influence behind them for good and create a new era of progress.

Revival's greatest influence is often exerted upon the poor and upon those whom the churches have neglected. In an age of declining faith, the church becomes depleted of its spirit of sacrifice and becomes self-seeking and worldly. As a consequence, the heroic spirit departs from it, and those masses of the community who are unattractive because of their ignorance and poverty are neglected and become more degraded.

When, however, the glad news of redeeming love is proclaimed with that passionate exultation and conviction that are the authentic notes of every revival, then it is to the poor that the gospel is preached. It is the common people who hear it gladly. Having found little of love, yet full of hunger for it, their hearts are drawn to the message of that divine compassion that, in love for them, did not shrink from the uttermost sacrifice. While they are poor in this world's wealth, their eyes are filled with the glory of those spiritual riches that the gospel so lovingly and freely offers them.

Thus, a revival means the uplifting and re-creation of large masses of the community--and usually of that part of the community whose lives, because of their poverty and degradation, are a menace to the state. There is no doubt, for instance, that the revival under Wesley saved England from the peril of a revolutionary movement such as broke out in France. It did so by setting the affection of the masses--awakening to a consciousness of their strength in the Industrial Revolution--on things above and not on things beneath.

Finally, the effect of a revival upon the church is profound and far reaching. While the word revive, strictly speaking, means "to bring to life again," the word, in its religious application, has been widened to include the awakening of those who were dead and the quickening of those already awakened. Revival, when it appears, reveals to the church its spiritual decay, worldliness, and insincerity of witness.

Historically, spiritual decay seems to move along two distinct lines. The first tendency is for the doctrine of the church to lose its power of convicting the conscience and moving the heart. Interest begins to wane and men's minds are attracted in other directions and by fresh discoveries made in other fields. Preachers continue to use the old words once so full of convincing and converting power, but now powerless, these expressions become the mere jargon of the pulpit.

The second tendency is for the worship of the church to become formal and lifeless. When the spiritual glow departs, the forms of worship become ends in themselves. At such a time the ministry degenerates. Those who minister in holy things become worldly, and the love of wealth, ease, and power--the three deadly sins of those who occupy this high vocation--appear. They give the sanction of an evil example to the worldly, and become the object of scorn to the skeptical and indifferent.

These dangers are a constant menace to the church. However, the moment the first breath of revival touches the heart of the church, then instantly, as if awakening from a long stupor, men wake up. They break the chains that bind them, and with a newfound joy, they return to simplicity of worship and intense sincerity of life.

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