

A Season of Intensive Preparation

by Jonathan Goforth

Jonathan Goforth's journey from dissatisfaction to revival, marked by a season of intensive preparation and a deep emphasis on prayer, ultimately led to a season of spiritual transformation among Chinese missionaries.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 85:6, Joel 2:28, Matthew 18:19, John 14:12, Acts 3:19, Ephesians 3:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, James 4:8, 1 Peter 5:6

Topics: "Spiritual Revival", "Prayer Movement"

Description

Jonathan Goforth reflects on his missionary work in China, feeling dissatisfied with the lack of results after years of labor. Through intense study of the Scriptures and accounts of revivals, he realizes the need for a deeper spiritual awakening. Encountering the teachings of Finney, he commits to understanding and obeying the spiritual laws governing revival. After resolving a personal conflict as directed by the Spirit, he experiences a powerful revival during a tour of his out-stations, witnessing transformed lives and a spirit of prayer. Inspired by the Korean Revival, he shares the story with missionaries across China, leading to a deep commitment to daily prayer for a divine blessing upon the Church of China.

Transcript

UPON returning to China in the fall of 1901, after having recuperated from the harrowing effects of the Boxer ordeal, I began to experience a growing dissatisfaction with the results of my work. In the early pioneer years I had buoyed myself with the assurance that a seedtime must always precede a harvest, and had, therefore, been content to persist in the apparently futile struggle. But now thirteen years had passed, and the harvest seemed, if anything, farther away than ever. I felt sure that there was something larger ahead of me, if I only had the vision to see what it was, and the faith to grasp it. Constantly there would come back to me the words of the Master: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do . . ." And always there would sink deep the painful realization of how little right I had to make out that what I was doing from year to year was equivalent to the "greater works."

Restless, discontented, I was led to a more intensive study of the Scriptures. Every passage that had any bearing upon the price of, or the road to, the accession of power became life and breath to me. There were a number of books on Revival in my library. These I read over repeatedly. So much did it become an obsession with me that my wife began to fear that my mind would not stand it. Of great inspiration to me were the reports of the Welsh Revival of 1904 and 1905. Plainly, Revival was not a thing of the past.

Slowly the realization began to dawn upon me that I had tapped a mine of infinite possibility.

Late in the fall of 1905 Eddy's little pamphlet, containing selections from "Finney's Autobiography and Revival Lectures," was sent to me by a friend in India. It was the final something which set me on fire. On the front page of this pamphlet there was a statement to the effect that a farmer might just as well pray for a temporal harvest without fulfilling the laws of nature, as for Christians to expect a great ingathering of souls by simply asking for it and without bothering to fulfill the laws governing the spiritual harvest. "If Finney is right," I vowed, "then I'm going to find out what those laws are and obey them, no matter what it costs." Early in 1906, while on my way to take part in the intensive evangelistic work which our mission conducted yearly at the great idolatrous fair at Hsun Hsien, a brother missionary loaned me the full "Autobiography" of Finney. It is impossible for me to estimate all that that book meant to me. We missionaries read a portion of it daily while we carried on our work at the fair.

It was at this fair that I began to see evidence of the first stirrings in the people's hearts of the greater power. One day, while I was preaching on I Tim. ii. 17, many seemed deeply touched. An evangelist behind me was heard to exclaim in an awed whisper, "Why, these people are being moved just as they were by Peter's sermon at Pentecost." That same evening, in one of our rented halls, I spoke to an audience that completely filled the building. My text was I Peter ii. 24: "He bore our sins in His own body on the tree." Conviction seemed to be written on every face. Finally, when I called for decisions, the whole audience stood up as one man, crying, "We want to follow this Jesus Who died for us." I expected that one of the evangelists would be ready to take my place; but what was my surprise, when I turned around, to find the whole band, ten in number, standing there motionless, looking on in wonder. Leaving one to take charge of the meeting, the rest of us went into an inner room for prayer. For some minutes there was complete silence. All seemed too awed to say anything. At last one of the evangelists, his voice breaking, said: "Brethren, He for Whom we have prayed so long was here in very deed tonight. But let us be sure that if we are to retain His presence we must walk very carefully."

In the autumn of 1906, having felt depressed for some time by the cold and fruitless condition of my outstations, I was preparing to set out on a tour to see what could be done to revive them. There was a matter, however, between the Lord and myself, that had to be straightened out before He could use me. I need not go into the details. Suffice to say that there was a difference between a brother missionary and myself. I honestly felt that I was in the right. (Such, of course, is very human. In any difference it is always safe to divide by half.) At any rate, the pressure from the Spirit was quite plain. It was that I should go and make that thing straight. I kept answering back to God that the fault was the other man's, not mine; that it was up to him to come to me, not for me to go to him.

The pressure continued. "But Lord," I expostulated, "he came to my study and in tears confessed his fault. So, isn't the thing settled?" "You hypocrite!" I seemed to hear Him say, "you know that you are not loving each other as brethren, as I commanded you to." Still I held out. The fault was the other man's, I kept insisting; surely, therefore, I couldn't be expected to do anything about it. Then came the final word, "If you don't straighten this thing out before you go on that trip, you must expect to fail. I can't go with you." That humbled me somewhat. I did not feel at all easy about going on that long and difficult tour without His help. Well I knew that by myself I would be like one beating the air.

The night before I was to start out on my trip I had to lead the prayermeeting for the Chinese Christians. All the way out to the church the pressure continued: "Go and straighten this thing out, so that I may go with you tomorrow." Still I wouldn't yield. I started the meeting. It was all right while they were singing a hymn

and during the reading of Scripture. But as soon as I opened my lips in prayer I became confused, for all the time the Spirit kept saying: "You hypocrite! Why don't you straighten this thing out?" I became still more troubled while delivering the short prayeraddress. Finally, when about halfway through my talk the burden became utterly intolerable and I yielded. "Lord," I promised in my heart, "as soon as this meeting is over, I'll go and make that matter right." Instantly something in the audience seemed to snap. My Chinese hearers couldn't tell what was going on in my heart; yet in a moment the whole atmosphere was changed. Upon the meeting being thrown open for prayer, one after another rose to their feet to pray, only to break down weeping. For almost twenty years we missionaries had been working among the Honanese, and had longed in vain to see a tear of penitence roll down a Chinese cheek.

It was late that night when the meeting closed. As soon as I could get away I hastened over to the house of my brother missionary, only to find that the lights were out and that the whole family were in bed. Not wishing to disturb them I went back to my home. But the difficulty was settled. Next morning, before daybreak, I was on my way to the first outstation. The results of that tour far exceeded anything that I had dared hope for. At each place the spirit of judgment was made manifest. Wrongs were righted and crooked things were made straight. At one place I was only able to spend a single night, but that night all present broke down. In the following year one outstation more than doubled its numbers; to another fiftyfour members were added, and to another eighty-eight.

It was only a few months after I had completed this tour that the religious world was electrified by the marvelous story of the Korean Revival. The Foreign Mission Secretary of our Church, Dr. R. P. MacKay, who was visiting in China at the time, asked me to accompany him to Korea. I need hardly say how greatly I rejoiced at such an opportunity. The Korean movement was of incalculable significance in my life because it showed me at firsthand the boundless possibilities of the revival method. It is one thing to read about Revival in books. To witness its working with one's own eyes and to feel its atmosphere with one's own heart is a different thing altogether. Korea made me feel, as it did many others, that this was God's plan for setting the world aflame.

I had not been in Korea very long before I was led back to the source from which this great movement sprang. Mr. Swallen, of Pingyang, told me how that the missionaries of his station, both Methodists and Presbyterians, upon hearing of the great Revival in the Kassia Hills of India, had decided to pray every day at the noon hour until a similar blessing was poured out upon them. "After we had prayed for about a month," said Mr. Swallen, "a brother proposed that we stop the prayermeeting, saying, 'We have been praying now for a month, and nothing unusual has come of it. We are spending a lot of time. I don't think we are justified. Let us go on with our work as usual, and each pray at home as he finds it convenient.' The proposal seemed plausible. The majority of us, however, decided that, instead of discontinuing the prayermeeting, we would give more time to prayer, not less. With that in view, we changed the hour from noon to four o'clock; we were then free to pray until suppertime, if we wished. We kept to it, until at last, after months of waiting, the answer came."

As I remember, those missionaries at Pingyang were just ordinary, everyday people. I did not notice any outstanding figure among them. They seemed to live and work and act like other missionaries. It was in prayer that they were different. One evening, Dr. MacKay and myself were invited to attend the missionary prayer-meeting. Never have I been so conscious of the Divine Presence as I was that evening. Those missionaries seemed to carry us right up to the very Throne of God. One had the feeling that they were indeed communing with God, face to face. On the way back to our host's residence, Dr. MacKay was silent for some time. I could see that he was greatly agitated. Finally, with deep emotion, he exclaimed:

"What amazing prayer! You missionaries in Honan are nowhere near that high level."

What impressed me, too, was the practical nature of the movement. I soon saw that this was no wild gust of "religious enthusiasm," dying with the wind upon whose wings it had been borne. There were, of course, the usual outward manifestations which inevitably accompany such phenomenal outpourings of spiritual power. But beyond all that was the simple fact that here were tens of thousands of Korean men and women whose lives had been completely transformed by the touch of the Divine fire. I saw great churches, seating fifteen hundred people, so crowded that it was found necessary to hold two services, one for the men and one for the women. Every one seemed almost pathetically eager to spread the "glad tidings." Even little boys would run up to people on the street and plead with them to accept Christ as their Savior. One thing that especially struck me was their abounding liberality. The poverty of the Koreans is proverbial. Yet one missionary told me that he was afraid to speak to them about money; they were giving so much already. Everywhere I saw an evident devotion for the Holy Word. Every one seemed to carry a Bible. And permeating it all was that marvellous spirit of prayer.

On our way back to Honan, Dr. MacKay and I took the northern route through Manchuria. There was but one dominant thought in my mind. Since God was no respecter of persons, He was surely just as willing to bless China as Korea. I resolved that this would be the burden of my message wherever I went. At Mukden I told the story of the Korean Revival, one Sunday morning, to a large congregation. They seemed to be deeply moved, and asked me to come back in February of the following year to conduct a week of special meetings. At Liaoyang the story met with the same warm reception, and here again an invitation was extended to me to return next year and give a series of revival addresses. Continuing southwards, we came to Peitaiho, where once again I told the story, this time to a large body of missionaries. A profound impression was made. A number of the missionaries got together and resolved that they would pray

Upon my arrival at Changtehfu, I found a letter awaiting me from the missionaries of Kikungshan, insisting that I go and tell the story to them, too. On the Sunday evening that I gave the address at Kikungshan I noticed, as I ended, that I had gone considerably over the rather generous time limit which I had set myself. Not wishing, therefore, to detain the people any longer, I omitted the closing hymn and simply pronounced the benediction. But, to my surprise, for at least six minutes no one stirred. The stillness of death seemed to pervade the assembly. Then gradually suppressed sobs became audible here and there. In a little while, missionaries were rising to their feet and in tears confessing their faults one to another. It was late that night when we finally scattered to our homes.

A conference, with a schedule of prepared addresses, had been planned for the ensuing week. But when the missionaries met on the Monday morning it was decided that we should throw the prepared schedule aside and just continue in prayer and along whatever line the Lord should move us. Never have I passed more wonderful days among my missionary brethren in China. Before we finally separated to our different stations, scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country, we resolved that, no matter where we were or what we were doing, we would pray every day at four o'clock in the afternoon until the Divine blessing fell upon the Church of China.

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