

Repentance and Confession in Shansi

by Jonathan Goforth

Jonathan Goforth's sermon emphasizes the transformative power of repentance and confession within the context of revival in Shansi, China.

Scripture: Proverbs 28:13, Jeremiah 23:29, Acts 3:19, James 5:16, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Repentance", "Revival"

Description

Jonathan Goforth preaches about the martyr province of Shansi in China, where over one hundred missionaries and many native Christians were killed during a terrible persecution. He shares a story of a Chinese scholar who was moved to believe in Jesus after witnessing the fearlessness and faith of missionaries facing death. Goforth also recounts the powerful revival in Taiyuan where backsliders confessed their sins and sought forgiveness, leading to a transformation in the community. Additionally, he describes the challenges faced in Hsichow, including a woman with an ungovernable temper and a former influential member who fell into sin, but through prayer and repentance, they experienced a revival.

Transcript

SHANSI has been wellnamed the "martyr province of China." In 1900 it was under the rule of that most infamous of governors, Yu Hsien. In his persecution of the Christian Church this man quite outstripped any other Chinese official during that terrible year. In his province alone over one hundred missionaries, besides many native Christians, were done to death.

Some years ago, in Honan, I was talking with an eminent Chinese scholar from Shansi. He seemed very near to the kingdom. "I am convinced," he said, and there were tears in his eyes as he spoke, "that there can be no salvation for us sinners except through the Redeemer, Jesus Christ." He told me that he had been led to look into the Scriptures as a result of the terrible massacre which had taken place in the governor's yamen at Taiyuanfu in 1900. He happened to be in the courtyard, he said, when about sixty missionaries were driven in and herded together, awaiting execution. What impressed him most of all about these people, he declared, was their amazing fearlessness. There was no panic, no crying for mercy. Roman Catholic and Protestant - they waited on death with perfect calmness.

He went on to say that just before the carnage began a goldenhaired girl of about thirteen years of age went and stood before the governor. "Why are you planning to kill us?" she asked, her voice carrying to the farthest corner of the courtyard. "Haven't our doctors come from faroff lands to give their lives for your people? Many with hopeless diseases have been healed; some who were blind have received their sight,

and health and happiness have been brought into thousands of your homes because of what our doctors have done. Is it because of this good that has been done that you are going to kill us?" The governor's head was down. He had nothing to say. There was really nothing he could say. She continued: "Governor, you talk a lot about filial piety. It is your claim, is it not, that among the hundred virtues filial piety takes the highest place. But you have hundreds of young men in this province who are opium sots and gamblers. Can they exercise filial piety? Can they love their parents and obey their will? Our missionaries have come from foreign lands and have preached Jesus to them, and He has saved them and given them power to live rightly and to love and obey their parents. Is it then, perhaps, because of this good that has been done that we are to be killed?"

By this time the governor was writhing. Each word seemed to touch him to the quick. It was far more than a defence, that brave speech, it was a sentence. It was the girl who sat in judgment and the governor stood at the bar. But the drama lasted only for one brief moment. A soldier, standing near the girl, grasped her by the hair, and with one blow of his sword severed her head from her body. That was the signal for the massacre to begin.

"I saw fifty-nine men, women, and children killed that afternoon," went on the scholar. "Even in the very moment of death every face seemed to hold a smile of peace. I saw one lady speaking cheerfully to a little boy who was clinging to her hand. Then her turn came, and her body fell to the yamen floor. But the little fellow, without the sign of a whimper on his face, stood straight upright, still holding fast his mother's hand. Then another blow, and the little mangled corpse lay beside that of the mother. Is it any wonder, therefore, that such marvellous fortitude should have led me to search your Scriptures and to have compelled me to believe that the Bible is in very truth the Word of God?"

In view of the foregoing, one can understand, perhaps, that it was with a feeling almost akin to awe that I came to Taiyuan in the fall of 1908 to lead a series of special meetings. The blood of the martyrs, shed there eight years before, made it sacred ground to me. It was wonderful how mightily the Spirit of God worked in the Church of Taiyuan during those days. So marked was His presence, indeed, that it was quite a common thing to overhear people in the city telling each other that a "new Jesus" had come. Their reason for saying this was that for years many of the professing Christians had been cheating their neighbours and quarrelling with them. Some, indeed, had gone so far as to revile their parents and beat their wives. It seemed that the other Jesus was too old or had lost His power to keep them in order. But this "new Jesus," it appeared, was doing wonderful things. He was making all those old backsliders get up before the whole Church and confess their sins, and afterwards go right back to their heathen neighbours and pay back anything that they owed, and beg the forgiveness of all whom they had wronged. But what was the greatest surprise of all was that they should even go so far as to abase themselves before their wives, asking their pardon for the way in which they had mistreated them. In this way a Revival served to carry conviction to the great mass of people outside the Church, that the Living God had come among His people.

My programme in Shansi had been so arranged as to give me only one day at Hsichow. It hardly seemed possible that any movement worth speaking of would result in so short a time. I had been warned, too, that there were several very serious hindrances in the Hsichow Church. It seemed that the wife of one of the prominent teachers in the mission school was a woman of ungovernable temper. Some time previous to my coming, in one of her fierce bursts of anger, she had gone blind. With her constant quarrelling she was causing trouble right and left. Yet the missionaries knew quite well that if they said anything to her she would go up and down the street, Chinese fashion, proclaiming at the top of her voice all manner of evil

things about them. So they chose to leave her strictly alone.

But the most serious difficulty which the missionaries had to face had arisen in connection with the actions of [a] certain Mr. Kuo, who for many years had been one of the most influential members of the Church. During the Boxer uprising of 1900, he had displayed unusual bravery, having done a great deal to comfort and strengthen his fellow Christians through months of the most bitter persecution. After the Allies had captured Peking and the Empress Dowager had fled west to Sianfu, and the officials everywhere were becoming frightened and beginning to try and undo the wrongs which had been heaped upon the heads of the hapless Christians, this Mr. Kuo was often called to the residence of the local mandarin for the purpose of consultation. He and the mandarin became quite friendly, and sometimes he would be asked to stay for meals, and drink would be pressed upon him. There came occasions when he returned from the yamen hopelessly drunk, hardly able to stagger back to his home. Once, on returning intoxicated from one of these parties, he had almost killed his wife. The missionaries felt at last that it was their duty to remonstrate with Mr. Kuo on the course which he was taking. He had flown into a rage and left the church, taking half the members with him.

Upon my arrival at Hsichow I sent a note to Mr. Kuo, saying how I had heard of his heroism during the Boxer uprising and that I was very anxious to meet him, and that I hoped he would come to the services on the morrow, as that would probably be my only chance to see him. He was pointed out to me at the service on the following morning. In the afternoon he was back again. I spoke that afternoon upon "Take away the stone" the text having been pressed upon me as I was on my way to Hsichow. Until about halfway through my address Mr. Kuo seemed quite at ease. Then something seemed to touch him and the tears began to trickle down his cheeks and his head went down.

Concluding my address I opened the meeting for prayer. Several responded, but their prayers were the most hum-drum and lifeless things I had ever listened to. It was an exceptionally hot day, and most of us were streaming with perspiration. There were an unusually large number of babies in the audience, and it did seem as if every last one of them was crying at the top of its voice. Over in a neighbouring yard a dog was howling as if it were being torn limb from limb. One found it hard to escape the feeling that it was just a little too much to expect that the Holy Spirit should work amid such an environment. Yet all the time, in common with the other missionaries, I was inwardly praying that somehow His power would be made manifest that afternoon.

Presently Mr. Kuo began to pray. Immediately all the babies seemed to go to sleep. The dog had either escaped or been put out of its misery. And somehow we forgot about the heat. As he went on, in broken accents, confessing his sin, there was the stillness of death in the assembly. As he finished, suppressed sobbing could be heard everywhere. In a little while a woman in the rear of the building started to pray. Her wan, tearstained face showed plainly that the depths of her heart, too, had been plumbed. Brokenly she confessed to her wicked temper and the way in which God's work had been hindered by it. It was the teacher's wife.

After the service Mr. Kuo and I walked down the street together. "Do you know," he said to me, "I simply can't account for what happened to me this afternoon. All of a sudden I seemed to experience an awful burning inside of me. I felt that I would burn up if I did not confess my sins right there and then and get right with God" . . . "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. xxiii:29).

When I arrived at Chuwuh sien it was to find that missionaries and Chinese leaders had assembled from three different provinces. Twentyone stations in all were represented. Every one seemed eager, expectant. Miss Stelman, the senior missionary at Chuwu, said to me: "We have prayed dry for revival here. If God doesn't send revival this time then I don't see how it will be possible for us to continue in prayer. We have exhausted every prayer promise in His Book." I was unavoidably limited to only four days. However, we all laid the matter before the Lord and prayed that He would do a quick work.

My opening address was on "What the Lord has done for His people at Chinchow, Manchuria." I had not been speaking very long before the tears were running down many faces, and heads were bowed in conviction. During the open session for prayer, which followed my address, every one who prayed broke down. The movement, thus begun, continued meeting by meeting throughout the four days. All manner of sin was confessed and put away. The county magistrate, his curiosity aroused by the reports which had been brought to him, came to one meeting dressed in civilian garb and listened to confessions of murder, theft and crime of every description. His amazement knew no bounds, because, as he afterwards said, he would have had to beat those same people almost to death before they would come out with such confessions before him.

Sometimes, although a meeting perhaps, had lasted for three hours or more, the people would go right back to their rooms, shut themselves in and continue in prayer. One could go through the compound away on late at night and find little groups here and there engaged in prayer. Long before daylight it was the same.

In the earnestness and importunity of their prayers the Chuwu people reminded me of the Koreans whom I had listened to at Pingyang. One day a former elder, who had been dismissed from the Church not long before, was brought to the meeting. When the Chinese authorities were paying indemnity to the Christians for the losses they had suffered at the hands of the Boxers, this man declared that he had been robbed of 5,000 teals' worth of property. A deacon, who knew him well, said that at the very outside he had not lost more than 100 teals' worth. The magistrate granted him 1,500 teals compensation. From then on he lost ground rapidly. When I arrived at Chuwu he was an opium sot, as was also his wife.

At this meeting, which the exelder attended, one Christian after another prayed in tears for his return. They were quite the most moving prayers that I had ever listened to. I did not see how the man could help but yield. But suddenly he got up, uttered some vile curses, and left the church in a rage. That was the last I ever heard of him.

After I left Chuwu the principal of the Boys' School, a man who had been greatly influenced during those days, adopted the practice of getting up for prayer every morning long before dawn and then at daybreak having the boys join in with him. This continued for some twenty days, until finally one morning the Spirit was poured out upon them. Quarrels were made up. Stolen things were returned to their owners. One boy had cruelly beaten a neighbour's dog, and there was nothing else for it but that he should go to the neighbour, and confess his fault. Another had stolen a neighbour's chicken. So he had to go to the neighbour, confess what he had done and repay him.

While I was at Chuwu the Girls' School had not yet opened after the summer holidays. The teachers, however, were at the meetings and were among those who were most deeply moved. When the girls returned, the teachers told them in the prayermeeting morning by morning about what God had been doing. The girls pressed for a day of fasting and prayer that they, too, might receive the blessing. The

teachers brought the matter before Miss Stelman, who said: "Just wait a day or two and we'll pray about it." The following morning, when the girls were assembled for prayer, the Spirit fell upon them, and I understand that it was late in the afternoon before they finally got up from their knees.

It was at Hungtunghsien that the famous Pastor Hsi ministered so faithfully and with such splendid results for many years. After Pastor Hsi's death a certain Elder Hsu was appointed to fill his position. The new pastor was a man of advanced ideas. He aimed to make his church renowned throughout the province. There were to be no poor among its members. To the farmers he said: "The Lord has given you splendid land. My suggestion is that you stop growing wheat. There's scarcely any money in that. Grow opium instead. Of course, being Christians, you won't smoke opium. But since there's a demand for it why not supply it? Besides, if you grow opium, you will have all the more money to make our church flourish."

What a man sows that he will also reap. The people followed their pastor's advice, with the inevitable result that in a few years many of them had become opium addicts. But that was not all. At Pastor Hsu's direction the church established a large cash shop in the city. For a time it flourished. Then the leaders became more covetous and issued bogus money. The bank went smash, and the reputation of the church or what was left of it went down with it. With this last disgrace the patience of the missionaries was exhausted. Pastor Hsu was dismissed and all opium sots were cut off from the church.

During the few days that I was at Hungtung the Spirit of Burning was very much in evidence. Hidden sins were continually being brought out. One day, while the people were praying and a profound spiritual atmosphere seemed to fill the church, a missionary sitting by me whispered that the expastor had just come in. From the moment that the man entered the building all sense of God's presence seemed to depart. The very devil appeared to take control of the meeting. This lasted for almost half an hour. Then he went out, and immediately men and women everywhere began to break down under conviction of sin, and the sense of God's nearness returned.

I quote this as a striking instance of the power of hindrance in an unrepentant leader. Not long afterwards, the expastor had Buddhist and Taoist priests attend his father's burial and had it published around the province that he had been fooled by the missionaries and that there was nothing in Christianity.

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