

(A Divine Visitation) Preparation - Part 1

by Richard Owen Roberts

Richard Owen Roberts emphasizes the importance of preparation for divine visitation and revival in the church's history and current state.

Duration: 1:19:28

Scripture: Isaiah 40:3-5, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Preaching Preparation", "Holy Spirit"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of preaching the word of God with passion and preparation. He acknowledges that there is a lot to learn and that everyone present has nowhere else to be, creating an atmosphere of attentiveness. The speaker mentions that certain points he will discuss have been previously addressed in HeartCry conferences, but believes they need repeating. He then delves into the specifics of John's message, referencing Isaiah chapter 40 and the need to prepare the way for the Lord. The speaker concludes by urging all preachers to rely on the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to transform their congregations into vibrant Christians who impact the world for Jesus Christ.

Transcript

As indicated earlier, because of the problems in the tent, some adjustments were made. And our book tables are down below down. You go all the way downstairs, then you have to keep going.

And perhaps most of you haven't found your way there. And then added to the complications, the fellow who was coming to look after the table didn't arrive. So some have reported that they were there trying to secure some material, and there was no one to take care of them.

Keep at it, will you? And we have some books and material I think you will find helpful. Now, some of our material is extremely limited in interest. But the tiniest handful would, for instance, want our large book entitled, *Whitefield in Print*, because it's an annotated bibliography of thousands and thousands of items about George Whitefield in that great season of revival.

And dozens, even hundreds of small articles about his associates and his enemies and about the incredible things that God did in his day. Another book like it is simply entitled, *Revival Literature*, some 5,000 listings of books and pamphlets dealing specifically with this wonderful, wonderful issue of revival. And we have a great many books of history.

One that I cherish, I think, above all the others is called, Scotland Saw His Glory. And it's a history of revivals in Scotland. Another one concerning Wales, Glory Filled the Land.

And several on revivals in this country and other places. And I trust that you will at least look the material over. I have always had great difficulty promoting this material.

I always feel embarrassed and ashamed. And yet, kindly people have said, do you think the Lord led you to write the material? Well, yes. Well, then it's absurd to write it and have it published and have no one read it because you refused to mention it.

Which is doubtless true. But nonetheless, it is with a great deal of difficulty. I encourage you to get down to the lowest level and look at our material.

There is another matter of which I wish to speak before I speak. And our dear friend, Ron Owen, and a few of you at least know him, a musician with whom we've had the great joy of working in meetings in a great variety of places. Let us know a few days ago that as a result of some cancellations, our revival heritage tour, which is scheduled for the month of July, has a few empty seats.

Now, the printed brochure says it's too late. But the director assures us that we can freely say to you if you can possibly afford to go. And all these international tours do tend to be expensive.

But Henry Blackaby and his dear wife, Marilyn, and Ron Owen, and his wife, Patricia, and Maggie, and myself lead these revival heritage tours. This, I think, will be probably our fifth tour. We'll be visiting England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, going to the places where God has moved powerfully in the past.

All three of us will be preaching and teaching. And then many locals from the different countries will join us and give us their take on these wonderful movements of God. So we have some brochures.

We haven't put them out, because some people are just prone to pick up free literature. And I'm one of those. And we simply don't have enough for everyone.

But if any of you are seriously interested, my wife, Maggie, is over here behind Sammy. She's dressed in blue and pink. And she's got some.

And I've got a few. So if, indeed, there's any possibility of your breaking away for a couple of weeks, we would be delighted to have you fill those few empty seats. Now, as I indicated yesterday, it's been on my heart in planning and praying over these meetings to deal with the issue of divine visitations.

And I sought yesterday to give you some real help and encouragement by using that song that Zacharias the priest wrote when he had been informed that his son was to be the forerunner. And then after the son's birth and at the time of the circumcision, he was mightily moved. And he sang that wonderful little song concerning his praise first to God and then his delight in the realization of the role of his own son.

And I've thought in terms of that message as divine visitation, man's greatest hope. I don't know whether you've ever been moved or stirred by that phrase at the end of Psalm 73, the nearness of God is my good. Throughout my life, I have learned that, indeed, the most precious seasons, the most wonderful days, even the most splendid moments are those moments of nearness when God himself draws nigh.

And there is no time in the history of the church more wonderful than in a season of divine visitation when God is near. It is the craving of our hearts, is it not? And it is the need of our land and the nations of the

world. Now tonight, the subject that occupies my mind and heart is simply divine visitation, preparation.

And we're going to be using this evening the passage in Luke chapter 3. Now this is a passage upon which I've often spoken. Each time, I expect from a bit of a different perspective. But I'm thinking of it tonight from the standpoint of preparation for a divine visitation.

And I have a number of things to say, which I expect some of you will find objectionable. I have been told repeatedly by pastors that you must not preach doctrine because doctrine is divisive. I say, hallelujah.

The church is filled with goats. The preaching of doctrine separates the sheep from the goats, not by any human hand, but by the proclamation of the word of God. Those that belong realize it.

And those that are outsiders either are brought to life in Christ or removed. And if there was ever a time in the history of the church when there needed to be a cleanup, it is surely today. What could possibly be more tragic than a church organized along congregational lines, and say Baptist or congregational or Bible church or free church or covenant church? I mean, dozens and hundreds of our denominations are organized along congregational lines.

Now, in the early days, it was clearly understood if each member is given equal voice, it is absolutely mandatory to maintain purity in the church. You cannot bring into a church fellowship the unregenerate and grant them voice along with the regenerate without huge problems resulting. But the standards have been lowered.

And now it's not credible evidence of regeneration that is demanded of those who wish to become members, but it's merely confession. And when I come later on this evening to speak of that, some of you will be alarmed. In fact, any number have asked me to clarify something I simply said in passing yesterday in speaking of my own walk with the Lord.

I distinguished between regeneration and conversion. And for many, that's a great problem. But hopefully tonight, I can put it in proper perspective.

And I pray that God himself will straighten out some of the kinks in our theology which have led us to this hour of degradation in the land. And part of the tragedy is that our influence is so great in the world that every ridiculous notion that the American church adopts gets exported around the world. And every nation is harmed by the evil to which we maintain great tolerance.

But that will come later. Now, I also want to thank those who are in charge this evening for starting late. It always encourages me greatly if a meeting starts three minutes late or seven minutes late.

I say, well, now, that is grand. Well, who can frown on me for taking a bit longer? So I intend to take my time tonight, and some of your time as well. And I'm going to do so with a very relaxed spirit.

Sometimes, you know, we have a clock right on the podium, and it stares you in the face constantly. And some places, they've got it arranged so that the thing is running down. You start out with 35 minutes, and suddenly, before you've gotten your introduction finished, you discover you've got two and a half minutes left.

But I'm not going to be troubled by anything like that tonight. You've got nowhere to go, and we've all got a lot to learn and a lot that needs to happen in our minds and in our hearts. Now, from various

conversations, it appears clear to me that things that I have often said in these HeartCry conferences need repeating.

And I'm going to mention some things in my opening statements, which some of you have already gotten settled long ago, and I'm grateful. But others of us are here for the first time, and we've never faced some of these issues. The first that I want to mention has to do with what I call cycles of history, and in particular, cycles of revival history.

We obviously live at a time that is absurd as much as what the church is and does is. Nonetheless, we have multitudes in the churches who are eagerly proclaiming that the next event on God's calendar is the end of the world. And I alluded to this fact yesterday when I said there are multitudes among us whose greatest prayer is, hurry up and come back, Jesus, and take me out of this rotten mess.

And you would think they didn't have an unsaved family member or a lost neighbor or work associate. How can anybody be longing to escape the mess when those they claim to love are outside of Christ and on their way to hell? I am frequently told by folk that I don't seem to understand that it's too late for revival, that we're at the end now, the end of the end, and the season of revivals has passed. And we've got but a little while, and it's all over.

Well, that could be true, but I wouldn't dare to be the one that said so. Our Lord was quizzed on the subject of His coming, and He refused to make a statement other than to say that that was held in the Father's hand. Now, I wonder at those who call themselves preachers of the gospel who pretend to know more than the Lord Jesus Christ.

My understanding concerning the coming of Christ is that we must all live in constant readiness. For the moment when we think not, the Son of Man cometh. I concern myself with that simple phrase, occupy until I come.

I refuse to be moved by those who busily hang and crape and insist that doom is all that we can hope for. But part of their terrible confusion and error comes because they do not understand history. And constantly, we are being told, times were never so bad before as they are now.

Now, that's ridiculous foolishness. Were you around at the time George Whitefield left the inn in Gloucester and journeyed to Oxford and enrolled as a student and came under a heavy burden for his sin and went to the various pastors and to some of his faculty members trying to find some ray of hope, someone who could point the finger in the right direction for a lost young man? And he found no help at all until he encountered Charles Wesley, who invited him to the Holy Club. And the Holy Club was trying to save itself by its earnest good works, none of them having yet been truly converted.

And Whitefield got ill in fasting and in praying and in trying to care for the widows and the orphans and gave away every little bit he had in an effort to help others. And he himself was not yet helped until someone slipped a little book into his hand by Scroogle. And then the way of salvation was open to him.

I don't believe there's a university town anywhere in America where a student profoundly concerned and convicted concerning his sin could not go and find help from a number of directions. It's silly to say times have never been so bad. Now, that's not saying times are good.

But why should we take a ridiculous stance? Why should we push things to an extreme that does not yet exist? I doubt seriously that you could even find a small town anywhere in America but what you would

find at least one true believer, and in most instances, not only a true believer but someone wrestling with God in fervent prayer for revival. And there have been many seasons prior to this where the picture was not that bright. Cycles.

In your minds, I hope you have good imagination. Some seem to act as if there's something unholy about an adult using their imagination. I don't happen to believe that.

I think God has blessed us with incredible imaginations. We can use our imaginations wrongly, but we can also use them to the glory of God. The wall's not very straight, but find a straight part of the wall over there, up fairly close to the ceiling, and put in a large eye hook.

And over on this side, do the same thing and stretch a taunt cable between those two eye hooks and envision that that taunt cable is the norm. And then ask yourself this question, where did the Old Testament open? Above the line or below the line? And you remind yourself that Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in the cool of the evening. But then they sinned.

Now understand that a revival cycle consists in the crossing of that norm twice, once down, once up. And if you go through your Bible carefully, you will find innumerable cycles. I mentioned yesterday the pamphlet entitled The Solemn Assembly, where I have listed 12 of the revivals of the Old Testament.

There are seven of these cycles in the book of Judges alone. Did you ever read the book of Judges in a single reading? Just sit down and read it through. Most of us don't really get ahold of the Bible because we read it in little pieces.

And surely there are times for reading little pieces, but there are also times for reading entire portions. The first time that I personally can recollect reading through Judges all at one time, it suddenly opened up to me in a way I had never seen it before. For I realized that in chapter two, there was a pattern laid out, which was then repeated seven times between chapters three and 16.

And what chapter two made crystal clear was this pattern. The people of God begin in right relationship with God, but they sin and do not repent. God then brings them under some form of a righteous judgment.

When that righteous judgment becomes so severe, with such immense difficulties for them, that they cry out to God with all their hearts from deliverance, God suddenly raises up a judge deliverer and they're restored to right relationship with God. Over and over and over in biblical history, you see these movements crossing the line coming down and then a turn and crossing the line again, coming back up. And just in terms of this nation, we can readily trace out several of these cycles.

Now, if you don't know anything about these cycles, if you don't know anything about this pattern, you might reach the absurd conclusion that the evidence is overwhelming, that it's too late, that it's the end, that we'll never see another mighty movement of God. No, I'm not denying the possibility that it is the end. I'm just not gonna be the fellow that goes way out on the limb and insist upon something that is not revealed.

Instead, I'm going to live in hope that the church, having sinned and it most certainly has, having refused to repent and it most certainly has, having been brought under righteous judgment and it most certainly has. Oh, you say, no, not that, that couldn't be, we're still here. You see, some of us have never learned to distinguish between remedial judgments and final judgments.

A final judgment is a judgment in which there's neither time nor opportunity for repentance, but a remedial judgment is gracious. It is a judgment in which God beckons us in His holy love to repent and return. And of course, the most common of these remedial judgments of Scripture and insofar as we can tell even of history is the withdrawal of His manifest presence from the church.

And I don't see how anyone who is thoughtful and prayerful can deny that the church across the land is operating very largely without the manifest presence of God. You say, how can you say that? Well, now listen, when God is present, what invariably happens? There's an awesome sense of the terror and the awfulness of sin and an incredible overwhelming sense of the beauty of holiness and the necessity of walking in holiness. When you cannot distinguish between the sin rate in the church and the sin rate in the world, there's only one possible explanation and that is God is not with us.

If He were, we would be radically changed. We've got to face these cycles. And I give this word about cycles tonight in the hope of encouraging your heart instead of acting as if it's too late or instead of being influenced by the crepe hangers and feeling any measure of discouragement.

People keep saying to me, don't you get discouraged? What have I got to get discouraged about? I was not called upon to bring revival only to proclaim the message. It's the Father who will indeed bring the results when His time is right. But I want to ask you to be sure now you understand this issue of cycles.

If I were to ask you, where does the Old Testament close in relationship to this norm that I've asked you to imagine? Well, clearly it closes way below the line. Now, I have mentioned that there are many cycles in the Old Testament scriptures, but there are certain sad observations that have to accompany that. There's no uniform distance of time between the cycle, nor is there any uniformity in the degree of the declension or in the height to which the revived people of God rise.

But there is a general pattern nonetheless. And that has the days of the Old Covenant proceed. They seem to slip deeper into sin and to rise to lower levels with each cycle.

But clearly at the end of the Old Testament, the people of God are way, way below the norm. And where does the New Testament open? Well, obviously at the same place where the Old One closes. But nonetheless, with that bright note that we were looking at yesterday, the proclamation of the angel of the forerunner, the song of Zacharias rejoicing and full of victory, the appearance of the forerunner whose life we will be looking at in a little while tonight.

And then the coming of the horn of salvation and the sunrise from on high. And one could even ask, where does the Old Testament close? If indeed it's correct to say the Old Testament opens above the line and closes below the line and the New Testament opens below the line. And I ask, where does it close? Well, thank God, above the line.

Now there are severe warnings, for instance, the seven letters in Revelation two and three or the book of Jude or some of the other epistles, severe warnings of what will come if the people of God do not walk in repentance and faith. But since the close of the canon, there have been these wonderful cycles, even in our own country. We even number them, the first great awakening, the second great awakening, the third great awakening.

I think we're stretching the truth when we try to describe the fourth, but I think the numbering is wrong to start with. Because some marvelous revivals occurred in our nation before Jonathan Edwards was on the

scene. There was that amazing revival in Boston in the days of the Puritans when the great earthquake shook the city and the people fell on their faces and cried out to God.

And a wonderful visitation occurred. And of course, most of the great revivals are not even matters with which we're conversant. But I'm living in expectation of the fourth or the eighth or the 19th, whatever is the correct number.

Because it's my conviction that all the evidence to me points not to the end of the world, though as I've said already, God is free to make it that. But all the evidence points to me to a time when we finally hit the bottom in our declension and turn and begin to see the spirit of God mightily at work in our midst. I live in expectation of it for years.

When I have packed my bag to go on a ministry trip, I add some extra things just in case I have to stay. And oh, what a happy day when indeed that is precisely what occurred. So I will say no more about the matter of cycles, but let that settle into your heart and let it brighten your hope and your expectation.

But there's another matter of which I wish to speak before we turn to our text. And that is an explanation numerous of you have heard me give on other occasions, but I think that for the sake of those who are not really conversant with these things, I owe this to you as well tonight. And that is I want you to learn to distinguish between the two types of revivals that we find.

For want of better terminology, I refer to these as experience-orientated movements and word-orientated movements. Now I've used the word orientated, and I want you to understand that I'm not saying that there is a revival that is of the word and there's nothing of experience, just word, or that there is a revival of experience and there's nothing of the word. I'm using the word orientated.

It's centered on. There are revivals that are centered on experience. And there are revivals that are centered on the preaching of the word of God.

Now you need to understand an experience-orientated revival will be short-lived and in all probability will produce little or nothing of society transformation. The great revivals that have been so productive of incredible good, we were talking earlier today about the Ivy League schools and the revivals out of which those sprang. Many of you perhaps don't know that Dartmouth was started by Eliezer Wheelock, who was so profoundly moved and affected and drawn into the labors of a revivalist.

He worked with Whitefield and others at that time and was powerfully impacted and determined to establish a school for the training of men for ministry. And some such story could be told about virtually all of our earlier academic institutions. Even the University of Pennsylvania was started as a result of the life and ministry of George Whitefield.

The anti-slavery movement grew directly out of revival. One could go on indefinitely describing the impact of word-centered revivals on the issues in society that need transformation. We're all in danger of fouling things up and focusing upon some item of need which is of lesser consequence than a truly great issue.

I want to speak respectfully, but I think we've wasted a lot of time and energy talking about racial reconciliation when our real problem is we're unreconciled to God. When we're right with God, we'll get right with one another and not until, but let me just spell out a few matters of gigantic consequence. I've already stated a word-orientated revival has distinct differences from an experience-orientated.

Number one, word-orientated revivals generally endure for protracted seasons of time. If this were a classroom and a quiz, I could ask you to give a list of the word-orientated revivals and of the experience-orientated revivals. The Reformation itself, incredibly wonderful revival was a word-orientated revival.

The revival of which I've just spoken under Edwards and Whitfield and the Westleys and that incredible army of men that God raised up was a word-orientated revival. Those men were great preachers of the word of God and they understood what the critical issues were and their preaching focused upon the great issues of Scripture, the great doctrines of Scripture. One could generally say that revival began roughly in 1730 and extended on until the death of Whitfield in 1770.

That's a pretty good record for a revival. Now, I'd like to ask you, do you think we need a revival that burns itself out in five days or that lasts six months? The depth of iniquity in the land is so great and the foulness of the church so absolutely terrible that one could hardly hope that even God himself would turn everything around in six weeks. He could, of course, but normally he doesn't.

And what we desperately need is a revival that is word-orientated. And some of you men are lousy preachers because you haven't yet sensed the importance of preaching. What a wonderful change would occur in our land if every man called to preach determined to preach as God has the capacity to enable him.

Instead, some mutter in their beards or speak to their notes and poor old folk like myself can barely hear half of what they say. You get a headache trying to listen to a preacher who's supposedly speaking for God and yet he can't speak loud enough for the first row to distinctly hear him. We need to get serious about preaching, but not just about preaching.

You attend a typical church today, typical evangelical church, and you'll discover what the pastor has done is to bring five rail cars, these big tank cars, full, absolutely full, virtually to overflowing of comfort. And he'll spend his 26 minutes or his 35, whatever he thinks he's allowed, he'll spend it spraying comfort over a congregation that is sound asleep. And he ought to set his heart to rouse them out of their slumber and to call them to return to God.

Now we have a particular danger at this time because the church is so self-orientated. And the revival that focused upon my experience and your experience would only feed the great evil that already exists. We need, I say again, a revival of the preaching of the word of God under the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching that is alarming, preaching that rouses those in their lethargy and brings them to the edge of their seat.

I don't pretend to be a very good preacher, but God at least has enabled these old eyes to watch congregations at the beginning of a sermon, seated, leaned back against their seats comfortably, and to watch the entire congregation move forward an hour and a half, two hours after the beginning of the sermon, every single person gripping the back of the pew or the seat and hanging on for dear life for every single word. Why not? Why not all of us preaching with such enabling by the Holy Spirit that our congregations are turned into vital Christians who are shaking the entire world for Jesus Christ? Well, I needn't enlarge further. An experience-orientated revival will burn itself out shortly.

It'll have little impact upon society, and probably many of its converts will fall away. But the word-orientated revival will have long endurance, and its converts, by the grace of God, will be thoroughly

rooted and grounded in the faith of Jesus Christ, and it will have mighty impact upon society. I close this segment of my address to you by simply helping you to grasp what I'm talking about.

The land of Wales, as I mentioned at a seminar this afternoon, knew something like 40 incredible movements of the Spirit of God. Revival after revival after revival that came about through the Spirit-empowered preaching of the Word. But in 1904, 1905, preaching was pretty well shut out.

You see, a ridiculous notion existed in the minds of many, and that notion exists in the minds of many today. Over and over, people say to me, we don't need more preaching. We've been preached nearly to death.

What we need is some experience. Nonsense! Nonsense! How does a dead man hear the Word of God? We've got millions of those in our churches who are dead in trespasses and sins. They could hear 100,000 sermons and never be touched and affected until God brings them life.

And when God is moving and working, when God draws near, when a wonderful visitation occurs, there are people who are prepared to hear the Word of God for the first time in their lives. And revival is always a wonderful opportunity for the most earnest and profound preaching that is possible. Now, Lord, before I go on, may I pray for my brothers and sisters.

Oh, what a tragedy if any of us would be caught up in this silly end times theology that has so fascinated the church in America. May we be absolutely, totally captivated with the determination to be ready at any moment and to occupy until you come. And grant that not one here will be content with renewed experiences, but that all of us will pant even as the deer after the water broke for your Word to be broken to us in such a way that we are literally captivated by divine truth.

Help me as I come in a moment to the text that I may be faithful and grant, Lord, that not one year will err in failing both to give heed to how they hear and to give heed to what they hear. Grant us grace for the sake of King Jesus. Amen.

I'm gonna do one more thing before I move to the text. I'm gonna give you a fairly recent illustration of what I've been talking about. Some of you know the name Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, pastor for many years at Westminster Chapel in London.

I had the joy many years ago of fellowship with him and of sitting under his ministry in the chapel for a protracted season of time. And it's dangerous for me to do what I'm going to do, but I think God will enable you to hear it. One evening, seated up in one of the upper balconies at Westminster Chapel, and the pastor had followed that evening a practice which was typical of him.

He most often began a sermon with something that was in the minds of the congregation. And that week, the Russians had for the very first time sent a cosmonaut into space. Some of you remember even his name, Gregorian.

And he traveled about in a nearby space and he came back and he said, I have absolute evidence there is no God. I've traveled all over out there and I saw no sign of any being whatsoever that could be described as God. And the doctor picked that up.

And that evening, he gave an incredible contrast between man's view of salvation and God's view. And while he was preaching, and many of you don't know me at all, and none very well, and you might think I'm

given to this type of thing. But that night, I was carried away in the spirit, feasting upon the word of God, simply caught up in the truth itself.

And suddenly, I came back to where I was and I realized the entire church was empty. Everyone had gone. I had been so captivated by God's word, so intently feasting upon it that I had no awareness of where I was or who I was listening to, save the word and the spirit.

And I came away saying, Lord, I don't humanly think it's possible, but oh, if in your grace and kindness, you might let me preach in such a way that the auditor did not have simply a listening event, but an encounter with a living God. That has been my longing ever since, well over 40 years of longing to be able to proclaim the word of God in such a way that people literally found themselves in immediate contact with the Lord God Almighty through the word and through the spirit. How high are your hopes, those of you who preach and teach? Have you set your sight upon being such a man of God that people literally meet the Lord in his word as you proclaim it? Well, now I might even run later than I intended if I don't hurry and get to my text.

So let's turn please to Luke chapter three. Luke chapter three, it's a wonderful passage. Some of you no doubt have preached upon it with great benefit and blessing to your auditors.

Now in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Aeturia and Trachonitis and Lysanias was tetrarch of Babylon. In the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he came into all the districts around the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every ravine shall be filled up and every mountain and hill shall be brought low and the crooked shall become straight and the rough road smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. He therefore began saying to the multitudes who were going out to be baptized by him, you brood of vipers who are indutifully from the wrath to come, therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham for our father. For I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

And also the ax is already laid at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And the multitudes were questioning him saying, then what shall we do? And he would answer and say to them, let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none and let him who has food do likewise.

And some tax gatherers also came to be baptized and they said to him, teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them, collect no more than what you've been ordered to. And some soldiers were questioning him saying, and what about us? What shall we do? And he said to them, do not take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely and be content with your wages. Now, while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John as to whether he might be the Christ, John answered and said to them all, as for me, I baptize you with water.

But he who is mightier than I is coming and I'm not fit to untie the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. And his winnowing fork is in his hand to clean, to clean out his threshing floor

and to gather the wheat into his barn.

But he shall burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Now, I covered in part the background of this passage yesterday. His name was to be John, chapter one, verse 13.

Many were to rejoice at his birth, chapter one, verse 14. He will be great, said the angel, in the sight of the Lord, verse 15. He will drink neither wine nor liquor, verse 15.

He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb, verse 15. He will be called the prophet of the most high, chapter one, verse 76. But now I want you to weigh this very critical issue.

In this passage, John purposefully draws a contrast. First, a contrast between himself and Christ. Secondly, a contrast between his baptism and the baptism of Christ.

Do you suppose that John had no idea who he was? Do you think that his mother Elizabeth kept silent concerning that incredible experience of conceiving at her advanced age? Or what happened to her when Mary determined to visit? And as she called out her approach, the babe leaped in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Do you think she never breathed the word to John of that incredible experience of his father being struck, dumb, and remaining in that condition all those many months? Or do you suppose Zacharias never ever said a word to his son about his experience in the temple? Never breathed a word concerning what the angel said. Never let his son see a copy of the song that he sang.

Never ever indicated even slightly to his son what happened at the time of his circumcision. I, for one moment, do not believe that John was ignorant of these things. But as I said, John draws a contrast in this passage.

The first aspect of it is a contrast between his person and the person of Christ. As for me, I baptize in water for the forgiveness of sin, but when he comes, whose sandals I'm not worthy to unleash, I think some of us need to understand that humility is not denying the truth. Humility is being well aware of the truth and deliberately choosing to take your rightful place.

Surely one of the most outstanding problems in the American church is sheer pride. Now, no matter how great you may think you are or some other person may think concerning himself, there isn't a single person here in this room, nor is there a single person anywhere across America or for that matter, anywhere in the world who is the equal of John. Our Lord made this clear.

Of those born of women, there is none greater. But John drew this contrast. As important as he was, as vital as was his ministry, he understood that in comparison with Christ, he was as nothing.

I repeat again, you don't have to undervalue the truth to be humble. In fact, the more realistically you face the truth, the greater the prospect of humility. Self-effacing is another form of pride, pride in reverse of its normal pattern.

We pretend to be something less than we really believe ourselves to be. There's no sham, there's no hypocrisy, no pretense in John the Baptist. He knows who he is, but he also knows who Christ is.

And knowing who Christ is enables him to know that in comparison, he is nothing. I don't think that many American Christians have any idea how to even draw close to the subject of humility. Pride is always maintained by comparison.

A perfectly ugly girl will stand next to a very beautiful one and will feel good about herself. And of course, the beautiful one will invariably associate with one of considerable less beauty. Men with strong muscles stand next to little puny fellows like me and they feel very good about themselves.

Persons with great brain power compare themselves with the average like ourselves and they feel good about themselves. Pride is puffed and maintained by comparison with the indifferent and the inadequate around us. And the only real cure for pride is to maintain the comparison not with your fellow wretched sinners, but with the Savior.

And to whatever degree your eyes are fixed upon Christ, you will discover your nothingness without foolishly pretending to be something you are not. Now, I happen to be a man called of God. I know that.

I've known that since I was a boy, but I also know that I'm but a servant of the Most High and that if ever I should attain even slight stature, it would be as nothing in comparison with Him. I believe one of the most beneficial things any one of us could do, and I mentioned this to a few around the table at breakfast time, I believe many of us need to call a moratorium on the misuse of the Bible. We go to the Bible to get sweet little tidbits to puff up our egos, to sustain us so we can get through another difficult day.

We use the Bible as if it were written about us, as if we were the prime character. And we ought to call a moratorium. I would suggest if you have not done so to declare that the next solid year will be given to fixing your eyes upon the God who reveals Himself in Holy Scripture.

And keep the focus on God until you're utterly overwhelmed with His greatness and have felt deeply your foolishness and inadequacy. John was a man of humility because he knew better than to turn his eyes from the One who really mattered. But I said there are two contrasts in the passage.

There's the contrast between John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus Christ. It's a shocking thing when you face it squarely. There are multitudes in America who put far greater emphasis upon water baptism than the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire.

What an ignorant thing to do. What a tragic failure. And what an awful thing to do ourselves to mediocrity by our failure to realize that as important as water baptism is, it cannot be compared with baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now that's not my theme tonight. And I shall not pursue it beyond this point. But if you have not done so, I would urge you to.

I spoke a few moments ago about Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones and the incredible experience I had there personally. Every time I visit the United Kingdom, I'm meeting men who were profoundly converted under his ministry, a significant percentage of the godly leadership in the United Kingdom today consist of men who attended Westminster Chapel and encountered the living God. He was a man who had discovered the contrast between baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire.

I plead with you to concern yourself greatly with John the Baptist and his declaration, his contrast in terms of his person with Christ and his contrast in terms of his baptism with the baptism of Jesus Christ. But now I ask that you turn back to this text and let me remind you of what the scriptures tell us the work of John the Baptist was to be. I have been speaking about his personage.

But now I speak concerning his work. Clearly, John the Baptist was to turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord, their God. There's a list embracing the work of John the Baptist recorded in chapter one, verses 16 and 17.

The first, to turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord, their God. The second, to go as a forerunner before him in the spirit and in the power of Elijah. The third, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children.

The fourth, to turn the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous. The fifth, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. The sixth, to go before the Lord and to prepare his ways.

Chapter one, verse 76. And the seventh, to give to his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. That's his work.

And thank God he did it and did it well. Would to God, there were some forerunners in our day. Maybe that's why God drew you here for this conference, to prepare you to be a forerunner.

What is the sense of praying for revival and not preparing? If we really believe that the Lord is going to visit us once again, do you think that the situation is ready? I'm horrified when I think of what might happen if Christ came in a dramatic and powerful visitation to America at this time. Just think of the millions of those in the church who believe the gospel consists of their own health and wealth. Think of those ridiculous persons who consider themselves Christians, who actually suppose that Christ came to save them from hell and to leave them in the grip of their sins.

Have you ever considered the absurdity of teaching and preaching that Christ will save a person from hell and leave them in their sins? What a statement concerning your knowledge of God that is. How dumb can God get? Imagine a God who has such hatred of evil that he actually prepares a hell in which to incarcerate forever the unrepentant, and then he sends his son and commands his son to die for the unrepentant, and he leaves them in their unrepentant state and delivers them from the hell prepared for them. That's the bulk of what is taught in the church today.

The multitude of people who think themselves Christians have only one interest, and that's a fire escape from hell. They love their sin. They intend to remain in it.

They don't even like a preacher who speaks against their sin. We've got some real work to do before there's any genuine sense in pleading for revival. We need to prepare the way.

Oh, we could use some little visitations, but oh, for a time when the whole of the nation is shook by the manifest presence of God, I expect that a revival coming at the moment would burn itself out in a matter of days, and in many respects would leave us in worse shape than we are now, because we don't know anything when it comes right down to it about holiness, and we don't care really seriously about repentance. Oh, would to God that every person who's come tonight might sense a call to serve as a forerunner and to prepare the way of the Lord. There's a lot of preparation that's needed, and there's no one man or even 1,000 men that can do it all, but let's turn now to some of the specifics of John's message.

You realize that we read a quotation from Isaiah chapter 40, verses three to five. A voice is calling. Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness.

Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The preparatory work that's needed is like road building. A highway of holiness needs to be prepared so that the Lord can journey to us, and we can journey toward him. Now, if you were involved in road building, what kind of thoughts would be in your mind? Do not road builders concern themselves with issues like drainage, and durability, and capacity, and strength, and safety, and speed, and accessibility? There's a lot of work involved in building a road.

I must say to your heart, I'm a road builder. I've got a task. I've got to prepare the way of the Lord.

Let's take note of some of the incredibly significant specifics of this quotation. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord. Now, John surely was a voice crying in the wilderness, but frankly, that's where we're at today, in an incredible wilderness.

You'll never become popular in our day, crying out, prepare the way of the Lord. But who needs popularity? We need the Lord, and we need to prepare the way for him to come. There's a series of specifics here.

Number one, make his path straight. The church today is pursuing a very crooked course. It winds in and out and around the great truths of scripture, but there's no straight path, and our task is to make the paths straight.

We're commanded in this passage that every ravine or valley shall be filled up, the valleys of doubt, of unbelief, of self-pity, of treasured hurts, of shame, of fear, of disordered passions. Let every valley be filled up. We need to begin with ourselves.

Have I filled in the valleys of my life? And if not, get busy. How can we hope to be used of God when our own hearts are so disordered? But not only is to every low place to be filled up, but every mountain is to be brought low. The mountain of pride must come down.

The mountain of secret imaginations must be destroyed. The mountain of stubbornness and rebellion must be given a fatal blow, and surely the mountain of dead works. For a period of a number of years, it was my joy to associate with J. Edwin Orr in what were called the Oxford Conferences.

Year after year, we met in Oxford, England, and talked with one another and exhorted one another and encouraged one another in revival. And one night in a prayer meeting, following our regular evening service, many of the men were gathered in an upper room of Regents Park College, and we were praying. Oh, it was a lovely time.

I was having virtually the time of my life. There were men from all kinds of places and backgrounds, and some of these brethren really knew how to let loose in prayer, and we were calling upon God to do all these incredible and wonderful things, and I was enjoying every moment of it, and then suddenly and pressed upon my heart was the question, do you believe that I'm going to move the mountain? And I don't think I cried out audibly, but I cried out within my heart, what mountains, Lord?

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