

Jonathan Edwards on Corporate Prayer For Revival

by Jonathan Edwards

A Humble Attempt to Promote the Agreement and Union of God's People Throughout the World in Extraordinary Prayer For a Revival Of Religion And The Advancement Of God's Kingdom On Earth, According To Scriptural Promises And Prophecies Of The Last Time.

The Future Glorious State of Christ's Church

'This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.' And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him'(Zech. 8:20-22).

In this chapter Zechariah prophecies of the future, glorious advancement of the Church. It is evident there is more intended than was ever fulfilled in the Jewish nation during Old Testament times. Here are plain prophecies describing things that were never fulfilled before the coming of Messiah, particularly what is said in the two last verses in the chapter where Zechariah speaks of 'many people and strong nations worshiping and seeking the true God,' and of so great an addition of Gentiles to the Church that the majority of visible worshipers consist of Gentiles, outnumbering the Jews ten to one.

Nothing ever happened, from the time of Zechariah to the coming of Christ, to fulfill this prophecy. It's fulfillment can only be in the calling of the Gentiles during and following apostolic times, or in the future, glorious enlargement of God's Church in the end times, so often foretold by Old Testament prophets, particularly by Zechariah. It is most likely that the Spirit of God speaks here of the greatest revival and the most glorious advancement of the Church on earth, the blessings of which will benefit the Jewish nation.

Indeed, there is great agreement on this point, between this prophecy of Zechariah, and other prophecies concerning the Church's latter day glory.

Consider Isaiah 60:2-4,

'See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.'

Without doubt, this entire chapter foretells the most glorious state of the God's Church on earth, as does Isaiah 66:8, Micah 4:1-3 and Isaiah 2:1-4:

'In the last days the mountain of the LORD'S temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it.'

'Many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' '

'The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.'

Nothing whatsoever has happened to fulfill these prophecies. Moreover, since the prophecy in my text (Zech. 8:20-22) and the following verse agrees with them, there is reason to think it addresses the same times. Indeed, there is remarkable agreement in the description given throughout this chapter with the representations of those times elsewhere in the prophetic books.

Though the prophet is at times referring to the future smiles of heaven on the Jewish nation, yet the Spirit of God doubtless refers to events far greater than these, of which these are but faint resemblances. The Jews had just returned from the Babylonian captivity, Chaldea and other countries, and resettled in Canaan where they were experiencing great increase of both numbers and wealth.

We find it common in the prophecies of the Old Testament that when the prophets are speaking of the favors and blessings of God on the Jews, attending or following their return from the Babylonian captivity, the Spirit of God takes the opportunity from there to speak of the incomparably greater blessings on the Church, that will attend and follow her deliverance from the spiritual Babylon, of which those were a type.

The prophet, in this chapter, speaks of God's bringing his people again from the east and west to Jerusalem (vs. 7-8), and multitudes of all nations taking hold of the skirts of the Jews. Although this prophecy literally refers to the Jews return from Babylon, its fulfillment cannot be seen there for no such things spoken of here attended their return. Therefore, it must refer to the great calling and gathering of Jews into the fold of Christ, and to them receiving the blessings of His kingdom, after the fall of the Antichrist and the destruction of the spiritual Babylon.

The Power of Prayer

In Zechariah 8:20-22 we have an account of how this future advancement of the Church should occur. It would come to fruition as multitudes from different towns resolve to unite in extraordinary prayer, seeking God until He manifests Himself and grants the fruits of his presence. We may observe several things in particular:

1. THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER.

Some suppose that prayer includes the whole of worship to God and that prayer is a part of worship during the days of the gospel when sacrifices are abolished. Therefore, this can be understood as a prophecy of a great revival of religion with true worship of God among His people, repentance from idolatry, and growth of the Church.

However, it seems reasonable to me to suppose that something even more special is intended regarding prayer given that prayer is not only repeatedly mentioned, but that this prophecy parallels many other prophecies that speak of an extraordinary spirit of prayer preceding that glorious day of revival and advancement of the Church's peace and prosperity. It particularly parallels what the prophet later speaks of the 'pouring out of a spirit of grace and supplications' as that which introduces the great religious revival (Zech. 12:10).

2. THE GOOD WHICH SHALL BE BROUGHT BY PRAYER: GOD HIMSELF.

Scripture says, 'They shall go to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of Hosts.' The good that they seek for is 'The Lord of Hosts,' Himself. If 'seeking God' means no more than seeking the favor or mercy of God then 'praying before the Lord,' and 'seeking the Lord of Hosts' must be looked upon as synonymous. However, 'seeking the Lord' is commonly used to mean something far more than seeking something from God. Surely it implies that God Himself is what is desired and sought after.

Thus, the Psalmist desired God, thirsted after Him and sought after Him:

'O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee. My flesh longeth for thee, in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is, to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary ... My soul followeth hard after thee ... Whom have I in heaven by thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee.'

The Psalmist earnestly pursued after God; his soul thirsted after Him, he stretched forth his hands unto Him. All of God's saints have this in common: they are those that seek God. 'This is the generation of them that seek Him.' 'Your heart shall live that seek God,' etc.

If this be the true sense of this phrase 'seeking the Lord of Hosts,' then we must understand that God who had withdrawn Himself, or, as it were, hid Himself, would return to His Church, granting the fruits of His presence and communion with His people, which He so often promised, and for which His Church had so long waited.

In short, it seems reasonable to understand the phrase, 'seeking the Lord of Hosts' means not merely praying to God, but seeking the promised restoration of the Church of God after the Babylonian captivity and the great apostasy occasioning it is called their 'seeking God, and searching for Him;' and God's granting this promised revival and restoration called His being 'found of them.' (See Jer. 29:10-14)

The prophets occasionally represent God as being withdrawn and hiding Himself: 'Verily thou art a God that hideth thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior. I hid me, and was wroth.' The prophets then go on to represent God's people seeking Him, searching and waiting for and calling after Him. When God answers their prayers and restores and advances His people, according to His promise, then He is said to come and say, 'Here am I' and to show Himself, and they are said to find Him and see Him plainly.

'Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I ...'

'But Israel will be saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation ... I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.' I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right.'

'The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him;'

let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.' We wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts.' (Isa. 58:9; Isa. 45:17,19; Isa. 25:8-9)

3. WE MAY OBSERVE WHO IT IS THAT WILL BE UNITED IN SEEKING THE LORD:

'the inhabitants of many cities ... yea, many people and strong nations.' Many people from all over the world will unite to seek the Lord.

From the the prophecy, it seems reasonable to assume that this will be fulfilled in the following manner: First, God's people will be given a spirit of prayer, inspiring them to come together and pray in an extraordinary manner, that He would help his Church, show mercy to mankind in general, pour out his Spirit, revive His work, and advance His kingdom in the world as He promised.

Moreover, such prayer would gradually spread and increase more and more, ushering in a revival of religion. This would be characterized by greater worship and service of God among believers. Others will be awakened to their need for God, motivating them to earnestly cry out to God for mercy. They will be led to join with God's people in that extraordinary seeking and serving of God which they see around them. In this way the revival will grow until the awakening reaches whole nations and those in the highest positions of influence. The Church will grow to be ten times larger than it was before. Indeed, at length, all the nations of the world will be converted unto God.

Thus, ten men, out of all languages and nations, will 'take hold of the skirt of the Jew (in the sense of the Apostle), saying 'We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.' Thus will be fulfilled, 'O thou that heareth prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come.'

4. WE MAY ALSO OBSERVE THE MANNER OF THEIR UNITY IN PRAYER.

It is a visible and voluntary union that was first proposed by some of God's people with others readily joining in over time. Those who live in one city will declare to those of another city, 'Let us go' etc. Many of those who hear their declaration will not only join with them but will make the call for the unity in prayer known to still others. As a result, the movement will grow, prevail and spread among God's people.

Some suppose that the words, 'I will go also,' are to be taken as words spoken by the one making the proposal. He states this expressing his willingness and desire to do what he is asking his hearer to do. But this is to suppose no more than is expressed in the phrase, 'Come and let us go ...' itself. It seems more natural to me to understand these words as being the consent or reply of the

one to whom the proposal is made.

This is much more agreeable to the flow of the text which represents the compliance of great numbers of people in this movement. And though if these words are thus understood, we must suppose something understood in the text that is not expressed: Those of other cities will say, 'I will go also.' Yet, this is not difficult to conceive of as such figures of speech are common in the Scripture (Jer. 3:22; Ps. 1:6,7).

5. NEXT, WE CAN OBSERVE THE MANNER IN WHICH THEY AGREE TO PRAY:

'Let us go speedily to pray,' or, as it says in the margin: let us go continually. Literally translated this means, 'let us go in going.' The Hebrew language often doubles words for emphasis (e.g., the holy of holies signifies that which is most holy). Such doubling of words also denotes the certainty of an event coming to pass. For example, when God said to Abraham, 'in multiplying, I will multiply thy seed,' God implies that He would certainly multiply his seed, and multiply it exceedingly.

6. FINALLY, THIS PROPHECY GIVES US A PICTURE OF THIS UNION IN PRAYER BEING AN INVITING AND A HAPPY THING.

We sense God's pleasure, and the results prove tremendously successful. From the whole of this prophecy we may infer that it is well pleasing to God for many people, in different parts of the world, to voluntarily come into a visible union to pray in an extraordinary way for those great outpourings of the Holy Spirit which shall advance the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ that God has so often promised shall be in the latter ages of the world.

An Example From History

Let me relate a brief history of what has happened in Scotland:

In October of 1744, a number of ministers in Scotland, considering the state of God's Church, and mankind in general, believed that God was calling those concerned for the welfare of the Church to unite in extraordinary prayer. They knew God was the Creator and source of all blessings and benefits in the Church so they earnestly prayed that He would appear in His glory, and strengthen the Church, and manifest His compassion to the world of mankind by an abundant outpouring of His Holy Spirit. They desired a true revival in all parts of Christendom, and to see nations delivered from their great and many calamities, and to bless them with the unspeakable benefits of the Kingdom of our glorious Redeemer, and to fill the whole earth with His glory.

These ministers consulted with one another on this subject and concluded that they were obliged to begin such prayer and attempt to persuade others to do the same. After seeking God for direction, they determined that for the next two years they would set apart some time on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings every week for prayer as one's other duties would allow. More importantly, it was decided that the first Tuesday of each quarter (beginning with the first Tuesday of November) would be time to be spent in prayer. People were to pray for either the entire day or part of the day, as they found themselves disposed, or as circumstances allowed. They would meet in either private prayer groups or in public meetings, whichever was found to be most convenient.

It was determined that none should make any promises or feel under strict obligation to observe every one of these days without fail; for these days were not holy or established by sacred authority. However, to prevent negligence, and the temptation to make excuses for trivial reasons, it was proposed that if those who resolve to pray cannot take part on the agreed upon day, they would use the next available day for the purpose of prayer.

The primary reason for this cooperation in prayer was to maintain, among the people of God, that necessity of prayer for the coming of Christ's Kingdom, which Christ directed his followers to do. We are, unfortunately, too little inclined to pray because of our laziness and immaturity, or because of the distraction of our own worldly, private affairs. We have prayed at times, but without special seasons for prayer, we are, likely, to neglect it either partially or totally. But when we set aside certain times for prayer, resolving to fulfill this commission unless extraordinarily hindered, we are less likely to neglect it.

The return of each new season will naturally refresh the memory and will cause us to remember these teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the obligations we have as His followers. We will be renewed in the importance, necessity and unspeakable value of the mercy we seek from God, and by frequent renovation, the vision to pray will be kept alive in our hearts at all times. Therefore, those ministers from Scotland determined that such gatherings would help encourage greater prayerfulness among God's people for revival throughout the year. They also believed that the quarterly gathering would encourage and strengthen people to pray, especially if they knew that many other Christians in so many distant places were praying for the same things at a same time.

It was thought that two years would be a sufficient trial period, after which time would be given to evaluate fruitfulness of the endeavor. It was not known but thought best to allow some time to make some adjustments if necessary. The time period, though short, was thought sufficient to judge its fruitfulness. Those involved would have the opportunity to communicate their thoughts, and

perhaps improve, on this manner of prayer.

As for promulgating this concert of prayer, the ministers decided to simply pass the word through personal conversation, and correspondence with others far away, rather than any formal advertisement in the press. At first it was intended that some formal paper outlining the proposal should be sent around for proper amendments and improvements, and then agreement. But after more thoughtful deliberation, it was concluded that this would only give rise to objections which they thought best to avoid in the beginning.

Great success seems to have met their labors for great numbers in Scotland and England, and even some in North America joined with them. As to Scotland, many people in the four chief cities, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Dundee joined. There were also many country towns and congregations in various other areas that participated. A Mr. Robe, of Kilsyth, stated that 'There were then above thirty societies of young people there, newly erected, some of which consisted of upwards of thirty members.'

The two years ended last November. Just prior to this, a number of ministers in Scotland agreed on a letter, to be printed and sent abroad to their brethren, proposing to them, and requesting of them, to join with them in continuing this concert of prayer, and in the endeavors to promote it. Almost five hundred copies of this letter were sent over to New England, with instructions to distribute them to the Massachusetts-Bay area, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Carolina and Georgia. Most were sent to a congregational minister in Boston along with a letter from twelve ministers in Scotland. Other copies were sent to other ministers in Boston, and some to a minister in Connecticut.

The proposal, dated August 26, 1746, opens with an explanation of the purpose and times for the concerts of prayer, and an entreaty to the ministers to communicate their opinions after the two year period had completed.

The ministers then go on to assure their Bostonian brethren that the concerts are not to be seen as binding; men are not expected to set apart days from secular affairs, or 'fix on any part of ... precise days, whether it be convenient or not.' Nor are they to be seen as 'absolute promises, but as friendly, harmonious resolutions, with liberty to alter circumstances as shall be found expedient.' Because of such liberty these prayer times cannot be judged to infringe upon those 'religious times' appointed by men.

The letter also asked ministers to consider composing and publishing short 'persuasive directions' regarding the necessity of prayer, either by particular authors or several joining together. Without such repeated reminders men are

apt to become weary and begin to neglect their duty. Ministers are also asked to preach frequently on the importance and necessity of prayer for the coming of the Lord's Kingdom, particularly near or on the quarterly times.

The Boston ministers are to understand that these prayer concerts are not restricted to any particular denomination, but is extended to all who have 'at heart the interest of vital Christianity, and the power of godliness; and who, however differing about other things, are convinced of the importance of fervent prayer ...'

It was proposed that the prayer should extend for seven more years and the ministers agreed to this. However there was concern that zeal for spreading news of the concert would wane because of the length proposed. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the first period of time (two years) was too short.

If persons who formerly agreed to this concert should discontinue it, would it not look like that fainting in prayer Scripture so ardently warned against? Would this not be particularly unsuitable given the need of public reformation?

Those ministers in Boston said of this proposal: 'The motion seems to come from above, and to be wonderfully spreading in Scotland, England, Wales, Ireland and North America.'