

**“Oh That You Would Rend the Heavens”:**

***Corporate Revival***

*Sermon Notes*

- **One healthy outcome of this Lenten series on revival is that together we would learn to prayerfully lament its absence**

*\*Let us consider...*

1. ...the conditions observed in this prayer for revival (63:18-19; 64:5b, 6-7a, 11)
2. ...the questions raised in this prayer for revival (63:15b, 17a; 64:5c, 7b, 12)
3. ...the petitions made in this prayer for revival (63:15a, 17b; 64:1-3, 9)
4. ...the promises claimed in this prayer for revival (63:16; 64:4-5a, 8)

**Next Week: Ezekiel 37:1-14 - “Can These Bones Live?”:**

***The Need for Revival***

## MEFC Community Group Study Guide

For the week of March 16th-22nd

*The following article is a helpful companion study to this week's sermon theme. In what we read below, Twin Cities pastor and author David Mathis helps us to explore what it looks like to lay the kindling for the fire of revival. Take some time this week on your own, with your family, or alongside your community group to read and discuss: "Revival in the Making: God's Central Means for Spiritual Renewal"<sup>1</sup>*

I grew up in a revivalist church in the South. Every few years, we had a "crusade" with special weeknight services and a dynamic, out-of-town speaker. I remember singing "Revive Us Again" as our theme during one of those rallies. I didn't realize at the time that we were singing Scripture, from Psalm 85:

Will you not *revive us again*,  
that your people may rejoice in you? (verse 6)

The history of God's people, from the first covenant into the new, is a record of various seasons and undulations, corporate backslidings and surprising renewals. Easy as it might be to criticize aspects of the revivalist tradition, something is profoundly right and healthy in the Christian heart that longs for, and prays for, revival — that God's people would freshly rejoice in him.

In every generation, our sense of the spiritual climate of our times is subjective, yet real. We find ourselves living in days either where true religion seems to be on the rise, or declining. When the tides are rising, we might pray that it become more than it already has. In times of apparent decline, we pray for the tide to turn. Either way, we pray for revival, broadly defined.

But then what do we do next? When our hearts swell with the longing, and with prayers, for God to send corporate renewal to his church, what might we devote our lives to, as we pray and wait?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/revival-in-the-making> . Accessed 3/14/25 @ 7:15pm.

## Revival's End and Means

An insight right there in Psalm 85, borne out across the Scriptures, gives us a critical and central component of every true revival of genuine religion. Verse 6 asks God for spiritual renewal (“Will you not revive us again . . .”) and clarifies what the heart of that renewal is (“. . . that your people may *rejoice in you*”). The *end*, or *goal*, of biblical revival is God’s people enjoying God, rejoicing in him, having him as our joy of joys.

Then verse 8 gives us a striking glimpse of God’s vital *means* in bringing about that end of his people rejoicing in him:

Let me hear what God the Lord will *speak*,  
for he will *speak* peace to his people, to his saints. (Psalm 85:8)

So, revival begins with God — through his speaking, his voice, his word. Man does not produce true spiritual revival; God does. And the way in which he does so is *through his word*. When God sends the fire of his Spirit to fall on the hearts of his people in some blessed local or regional renewal, the fire falls on the wood of his word.

## Lay the Kindling

Psalm 85 is a precious testimony, but only one — and we have far more evidence across Scripture that God makes himself central in revival *through his word*. In every lasting renewal of true religion, God makes his own speaking, his own word, to be fundamental and prominent. Psalm 19:7 celebrates that *the law* of the Lord — his teaching, his word — *revives the soul*. The Spirit’s flame does not land without the kindling of his word, and so rallying to God’s word is a plain next step for those who long and pray for revival.

The central place of God’s word is pronounced in the revivals of true worship under the prophet Samuel and later under King Josiah. Samuel’s ministry begins with the acknowledgment that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days” (1 Samuel 3:1). So enter the young prophet, with God’s revealing himself “by the word,” and God’s word coming to all Israel through Samuel’s ministry (1 Samuel 3:19–4:1).

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So too with Josiah, who became king in his youth, and walked in the ways of righteousness, but for years his efforts at reform only went so far, until “Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the Lord given through Moses” (2 Chronicles 34:14). As stunning as it is to us, somehow they had misplaced the Book! Apparently, spiritual dullness had led to neglect, and neglect led to misplacing God’s word. But when the priest and king discovered the Book and read aloud to the people “all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord” (verse 30), then the fire of national renewal fell.

### **Grant Us Some Reviving**

We see the centrality of God’s word in the spiritual renewal of his people yet again (and with special emphasis) in the after-exile revivals under Ezra and Nehemiah. In Ezra, fire falls in chapter 9, but not without decades of preparation recounted in chapters 1–8. Some eighty years prior, the first wave of Jewish exiles had come back to Jerusalem after Cyrus’s decree in 539 BC. Ezra chapters 1–6 recount this first return and the quarter century that follows (until 515 BC), with the beginning and (later) finishing of the foundation and temple, and the restoring of worship and the feasts.

Ezra doesn’t arrive until chapter 7, almost 60 years after chapter 6, and when he enters the scene, he’s introduced as “skilled in the Law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given” (Ezra 7:6). Accent on the word *given*. Ezra received God’s word *as given*, and so studies it and obeys it and teaches it, not to amend or edit it, but as God’s *given*. “Ezra had set his heart to *study* the Law of the Lord, and to *do it* and to *teach* his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

Chapter 7’s description of Ezra as *a man of God’s word* sets the table for the revival to come. Ezra is “learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord” (verse 11), and even the Persian king, Artaxerxes, twice writes of Ezra as a “scribe of the Law of the God of heaven” (verses 12 and 21). Ezra, then, is expressly commissioned by the king to teach the word of God to the people.

Apparently, Ezra manifests such skill and familiarity with Scripture that even the pagan king recognizes that “the Law of your God . . . is in your hand” (verse 14), and so “the wisdom of your God . . . is in your hand” (verse 25). With the

king's blessing, Ezra gathers "leading men" (7:28), and they humble themselves with prayer and fasting, imploring God for safe travel (8:21), and come safely to Jerusalem (8:31).

In chapter 9, Ezra learns of the moral (and marital) compromise of God's people with the surrounding nations (9:1–2). He is appalled and grieves, and "all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel" gather around him (9:4). Here the kindling is in place: a man of the word, now surrounded with those who tremble at God's word. That evening, Ezra leads them in a prayer of repentance which has, at its heart, the nation's infidelity *to God's word*: "we have forsaken your commandments" (9:10).

As Ezra prays and makes confession, revival begins: "a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly" (10:1). They plead with Ezra to teach them God's word. The officials and elders issue a proclamation for all returned exiles, without exception, to gather in Jerusalem in three days — and so begins the work of renewal (10:11).

### **Awakening of Tears and Joy**

This first renewal preserves the nation another thirteen years until the arrival of Nehemiah in 445 BC, with a new wave of exiles and a mission to rebuild the walls.

Nehemiah 1–7 tells the story of his authorization from Artaxerxes, coming to Jerusalem, overcoming opposition, and finishing the walls. Chapter 8 then bursts with the light of covenant renewal and spiritual revival under Ezra and Nehemiah working hand in hand — and now the centrality of Scripture is even more pronounced.

Ezra, the trained, skilled handler of God's word, appears again among the gathered people "to bring the Book" (Nehemiah 8:1), physically and homiletically. He stands on a wooden platform and opens Scripture in the sight of all the people (and they stand in reverence of God). He reads from the Book and gives the sense (8:8) — that is, he and thirteen other priests, skilled in God's word, explain and teach the Scriptures from early morning to midday. Strikingly, Nehemiah 8 characterizes the people, again and again, as attentive to, hearing, understanding, and responding to God's word, first with mourning over their own sin and then, once further instructed, with joy — the very "[rejoicing] in you" of Psalm 85:6.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and the priests remind the people that this day is *holy* (not a fast day but the *Feast of Tabernacles*) and seek to replace the people's grief with rejoicing in the mercy of God: This day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. (Nehemiah 8:10) Here we catch an amazing glimpse into the heart of revival as *rejoicing in God*. *Strength* (Hebrew *maoz*) is literally "refuge" or "stronghold" or "fortress," a place of God's protection. Mourning over sin is necessary, but in view of the stunning mercy of God, grief must soon give way to rejoicing. And this joy in the Lord is a stronghold, a refuge, for his people. Rejoicing in God, they are finally safe and protected, even from their own sin and its consequences. As John Piper explains,

The light was dawning that you can't honor Yahweh as holy if you only grieve in his presence. Grief is good. Fear is good. Penitence is good. Tears are good. But not if that's all you feel. God's holiness is the purity and perfection not only of his justice but also of his mercy and grace. And cowering people do not magnify the glory of grace. ("The Joy of the Lord Is Your Stronghold")

A day later, the people return "to study the words of the Law" (Nehemiah 8:13), and the revival continues in the fuel and guidance of God's word, day by day, as they read from the Book (verse 18). In the next chapter, they read from the Book "for a quarter of the day" (Nehemiah 9:3). When revival came, God's word was at the center, God himself working in power through his Spirit *by the word*.

## Heart of True Revival

For those of us longing and praying for awakening today, on this side of the greatest renewal in history — the coming of God's Word incarnate and the pouring out of his Spirit at Pentecost — what might we take away from these remarkable renewals in Scripture?

First, God will see to it that his people, in the ups and downs of their spiritual journeys in this sin-sick world, are renewed and revived. Even in our *longing and praying* for revival is already a great glimmer of God's sovereign work. Then, second, when the Spirit's fire comes in power, it falls on the wood of God's word. In our holy longings and fervent prayers, we open the Book. We read it, reread it, meditate on it, memorize it, study it, teach it, preach it, live it, spread it. It will be the word of God that fans the flicker of our burning hearts into a flame. And in and through his word, God himself will be the great prize. God in Christ will be the greatest gain in any true revival. The *end* will be his people's fresh rejoicing *in him*.