



1

Only a Prayer Meeting!

What a company we have here tonight! It fills my heart with gladness, and my eyes with tears of joy, to see so many hundreds of persons gathered together at what is sometimes wickedly described as 'only a prayer meeting'. It is good for us to draw nigh unto God in prayer, and specially good to make up a great congregation for such a purpose. We have attended little prayer meetings of four or five, and we have been glad to be there, for we had the promise of our Lord's presence; but our minds are grieved to see so little attention given to united prayer by many of our churches. We have longed to see great numbers of God's people coming up to pray, and we now enjoy this sight. Let us praise God that it is so. How could we expect a blessing if we were too idle to ask for it? How could we look for a Pentecost if we never met with one accord, in one place, to wait upon the Lord? Brethren, we shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians. To mix it up with the weeknight lecture, and really make an end of it, is a sad sign of declension. I wonder some two or three earnest souls in such churches do not band themselves together to restore the meeting for prayer, and bind themselves with a pledge to keep it up whether the minister will come to it or not.

But now that we have come together, how shall we pray? Let us not degenerate into formality, or we shall be dead while we think we live. Let us not waver through unbelief, or we shall pray in vain. The Lord saith to his church, 'Open thy mouth, wide, and I will fill it.' Oh, for great faith with which to offer great prayers! We have been mingling praise and prayer together as a delicious compound



of spices, fit to be presented upon the altar of incense through Christ our Lord; may we not, at this time, offer some special far-reaching petition? It is suggested to me that we pray for a true and genuine revival of religion throughout the world.

I am glad of any signs of life, even if they should be feverish and transient, and I am slow to judge any well-intended movement; but yet I am very fearful that many so-called 'revivals' have, in the long run, wrought more harm than good. Places which have had the most of religious excitement are frequently the most difficult to move. Men's minds have been baked hard in the oven of fanaticism. A species of religious gambling has fascinated many men, and given them a distaste for the sober business of true godliness. But if I would nail down counterfeits upon the counter, I do not therefore undervalue true gold. Far from it. It is to be desired, beyond measure, that the Lord would send a real and lasting revival of spiritual life. We need a work of the Holy Ghost of a supernatural kind, putting power into the preaching of the Word, inspiring all believers with heavenly energy, and solemnly affecting the hearts of the careless so that they may turn to God and live. We would not be drunk with the wine of carnal excitement, but we would be filled with the Spirit; we would not leap upon the altar, and shout and cry, 'O Baal, hear us!' but we would behold the fire descending from heaven in answer to the effectual fervent prayers of righteous men. Can we not entreat the Lord our God to make bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the people in this day of declension and vanity?

We want a revival of old-fashioned doctrine. Our fear is that, if 'modern thought' proceeds much further, the fashion of our religion will be as much Mohammedan as Christian; in fact, it will be more like infidelity than either. A converted Jew, staying in London, went into a dissenting chapel which I could mention; and when he returned to the friend with whom he was staying, he enquired what the religion of the place could be, for he had heard nothing of what he had received as the Christian faith. The doctrines which are distinctive of the New Testament may not be actually denied in set terms, but they are spirited away; familiar phrases are used, but a new sense is attached to them.

Certain modern preachers talk much of Christ, and yet reject Christianity. Under cover of extolling the Teacher, they reject his teaching for theories more in accord with the spirit of the age. At

first, Calvinism was too harsh, then Evangelical doctrines became too antiquated, and now the Scriptures themselves must bow to man's alteration and improvement. There is plenty of preaching in the present day in which no mention is made of the depravity of human nature, the work of the Holy Ghost, the blood of atonement or the punishment of sin. The deity of Christ is not so often assailed, but the gospel which he gave us, through his own teaching and that of the apostles, is questioned, criticised and set aside. One of the great missionary societies actually informs us, by one of its writers, that it does not send out missionaries to save the heathen from the wrath to come, but to prepare them 'for the higher realm which awaits them beyond the river of death'. I confess that I have better hopes for the future of the heathen than for the state of those who thus write concerning them. The heathen will derive but small advantage from the gospel which such triflers with the Scriptures are likely to carry them.

I know not a single doctrine which is not at this hour studiously undermined by those who ought to be its defenders; there is not a truth that is precious to the soul which is not now denied by those whose profession it is to proclaim it. The times are out of joint, and many are hoping to make them more and more so. To me, it is clear that we need a revival of old-fashioned gospel preaching like that of Whitefield and Wesley: to me, preferably that of Whitefield. We need to believe: the Scriptures must be made the infallible foundation of all teaching; the ruin, redemption and regeneration of mankind must be set forth in unmistakable terms, and that right speedily, or faith will be more rare than gold of Ophir. We must demand from our teachers that they give us a 'Thus saith the Lord'; for, at this time, they give us their own imaginations. Today, the Word of the Lord in the Book of Jeremiah is true:

Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD. They say still unto them that despise me, The LORD hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you (Jer. 23:16, 17).

Beware of those who say that there is no hell, and who declare new ways to heaven. May the Lord have mercy upon them!

Urgently do we need a revival of personal godliness. This is, indeed, the secret of church prosperity. When individuals fall from their steadfastness, the church is tossed to and fro; when personal faith is steadfast, the church abides true to her Lord. We have in and around our own denomination many true-hearted servants of Christ, who are hardly put to it to know what to do. Their loyalty to their Lord and to his truth is greater than their love to sect or party, and they know not whether to abide in their present position and fight out the great question, or to lift the old banner and quit their apostatising associates. Do whichever they may, it is upon the truly godly and spiritual that the future of religion depends in the hand of God. Oh, for more truly holy men, quickened and filled with the Holy Spirit, consecrated to the Lord, and sanctified by his truth! What can be accomplished by worldly professors, theatre-going church-members, semi-infidel teachers and philosophical preachers? Nothing but ruin can follow from a preponderance of these. Their presence is grievous to God, and disastrous to his people. Brethren, we must each one live if the church is to be alive; we must live unto God if we expect to see the pleasure of the Lord prospering in our hands. Sanctified men are the necessity of every age, for they are the salt of society and the saviours of the race. The Lord has made a man more precious than a wedge of gold: I mean, a decided, instructed, bold, unswerving man of God.

We deeply want a revival of domestic religion. We have been saddened at the terrible accounts of the impurity of this city; but, doubtless, one cause of this state of things is the neglect of household religion among Christians, and the entire absence of common decency in many of the lodgings of the poor. The Christian family was the bulwark of godliness in the days of the Puritans; but in these evil times hundreds of families of so-called Christians have no family worship, no restraint upon growing sons, and no wholesome instruction or discipline. See how the families of many professors are as dressy, as godless as the children of the non-religious! How can we hope to see the Kingdom of our Lord advance when his own disciples do not teach his gospel to their own sons and daughters? Have we not need to repeat the lament of Jeremiah: 'Even the sea monsters draw out the breast, they give suck to their young ones: the daughter of my people is become cruel, like the

ostriches in the wilderness' (Lam. 4:3). How different this from the father of the faithful, of whom the Lord said, 'I know him [Abraham], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD' (Gen. 18:19).

The surest way to promote godliness abroad is to labour for it at home. The shortest method for the overthrow of priestcraft is for every man to be the priest in his own house, and to warn his sons against deceitful men. May our dear children be so well taught from infancy that they may not only escape the common vices of the age, but grow up to become patterns of holiness! This is a great difficulty to our poorer friends in this loathsome city, which is becoming as polluted as heathendom. A good sister, who lives close to this house of prayer, came up from a country town with her little boy, and she was horrified before long to hear him use profane language, being evidently unaware of its meaning. He had picked it up in the street close to his mother's door. Where are the children of working folks to run if they are not able to walk the streets? All around us, vice has become so daring that a blind man may almost be envied; but even he has ears, and will, therefore, be vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked. Good people say to me, 'What are we to do?' I wish those who live in the breezy country village would stop there, and not come into our close streets, and lanes, and courts, which reek with blasphemy and dirty talk. Why do working men so often think it necessary, in their ordinary conversation, to use such abominable expressions, which have no useful meaning, and are simply disgusting? If ever Christian people should be pure, and should watch over their children with a holy jealousy, now is the time, and this is a worthy subject for daily prayer.

I would sooner have the doctrines of grace revived, individual piety deepened and family religion increased than I would watch a frantic crowd parading the street with noisy music, and harsh clamour. I see no special virtue in drums and tambourines. Make what noise you will to attract the careless if you afterwards give them sound instruction in the truth, and make them to know the meaning of the Word of the Lord; but if it be mere stir, and song, and swagger, what is the good of it? If gospel truth is not taught, your work will be a building of wood, hay and stubble, soon to be consumed. Quick building is seldom permanent. Gold, silver

and precious stones are scarce material, not easily found; but then they endure the fire. What is the use of religion which comes up in a night, and perishes as soon? Ah, me! what empty bragging we have heard! The thing was done, but then it was never worth doing; soon things were as if it never had been done; and, moreover, this sham way of doing it made it all the harder toil for the real worker.

O Christian men and women, be thorough in what you do, and know, and teach! Hold truth as with an iron grip; let your families be trained in the fear of God, and be yourselves 'holiness unto the Lord'; so shall you stand like rocks amid the surging waves of error and ungodliness which rage around you.

We want, also, more and more, a revival of vigorous consecrated strength. I have pleaded for true piety; I now beg for one of the highest results of it. We need saints. It may be that all cannot attain unto 'the first three'; but we cannot do without champions. We need gracious minds trained to a high form of spiritual life by much converse with God in solitude. These are the standard-bearers of the army: each one is a king's son. There is an air about them, humble as they are, as of men who breathe a purer atmosphere. Such was Abraham, who, by his communion with God, acquired a more than royal bearing. The king of Sodom shrinks into insignificance in the presence of the high-minded sheik who will not take of his lawful spoils from a thread to a shoe-latchet, lest the heathen king should say, 'I have made Abraham rich.' Saints acquire nobility from their constant resort to the place where the Lord meets with them. There, also, they acquire that power in prayer which we so greatly need. Oh, that we had more men like John Knox, whose prayers were more terrible to Queen Mary than ten thousand men! Oh, that we had more Elijahs, by whose faith the windows of heaven should be shut or opened! This power comes not by a sudden effort; it is the outcome of a life devoted to the God of Israel. If our life is all in public, it will be a frothy, vapoury, ineffectual existence; but if we hold high converse with God in secret, we shall be mighty for good. The Puritans were abundant in meditation and prayer; and there were giants on the earth in those days. He that is a prince with God will take high rank with men, after the true measure of nobility.

May the Lord send us many self-contained Christians, whose godliness leans on God for itself, and is not a second-hand affair!

We see too many Christian people depending upon one another, like houses 'run up' by 'jerry-builders', which are so slenderly built that, if you were to pull down the last one in the row, they would all follow. Beware of being a lean-to; endeavour to rest on your own walls of real faith in the Lord Jesus. I tremble for a church whose continuance depends upon the talent and cleverness of one man. If he is removed, the whole thing will collapse: this is a wretched business. May none of us fall into a mean, poverty-stricken dependence on man! We want among us believers like those solid, substantial family mansions which stand from generation to generation as landmarks of the country: no lath-and-plaster fabrics, but edifices solidly constructed to bear all weathers, and defy time itself. Given a host of men who are steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, and then the glory of God's grace will be clearly manifested, not only in them, but in those round about them. The Lord send us a revival of consecrated strength, and heavenly energy! May the weakest among us be as David, and David as the angel of the Lord!

As for you who are not converted to God, many of you will be caught in the great wave of blessing, if God shall cause it to break over us. When saints live unto God, sinners are converted to God. 'I was converted,' said one, 'not by hearing a sermon, but by seeing one.' 'How was that?' he was asked. 'My next-door neighbour was the only man in the street who went to a place of worship; and, as I saw him go out as regularly as clockwork, I said to myself, "That man regards the Sabbath, and the God of the Sabbath, and I do not." By-and-by, I went into his house, and I saw that comfort and order reigned in it, while my room was wretched. I saw how his wife and children dwelt in love, and I said to myself, "This home is happy because the father fears God." I saw my neighbour calm in trouble, and patient under persecution. I knew him to be upright, true, and kind, and I said to myself, "I will find out this man's secret, and thus I was converted."' Preach by your hands if you cannot preach by your tongues. When our church-members show the fruits of true godliness, we shall soon have enquiries for the tree which bears such a crop.

Dear friends, at our prayer meetings of late, our Lord has very graciously spoken to one and another of the unconverted among us. What a mercy that they were so far interested as to come! We have not said very much to them, but we have been praying for

them; and we have talked of the joys of our holy faith, and one after another they have quietly given their hearts to God while in the prayer meeting. I feel very glad about it; it was all that we needed to make these meetings the gate of heaven. Such conversions are specially beautiful, they are so altogether of the Lord, and are so much the result of his working by the whole church that I am doubly delighted with them Oh, that every gathering of faithful men might be a lure to attract others to Jesus!

May many souls fly to him because they see others speeding in that direction! Why not? The coming together of the saints is the first part of Pentecost, and the ingathering of sinners is the second. It began with 'only a prayer-meeting', but it ended with a grand baptism of thousands of converts. Oh, that the prayers of believers may act as loadstones to sinners!

There are a few among us who are not saved, and but a few. I do not believe they will long escape the saving influence which floods these assemblies. We have made a holy ring around certain of them; and they must soon yield to our importunity, for we are pleading with God as well as with them. Their wives are praying for them, their brothers and sisters are praying for them, and others are in the devout confederacy; therefore they must be brought in. Oh, that they would come at once! Why this reluctance to be blessed? Why this hesitation to be saved? Lord, we turn from these poor foolish procrastinators to thyself, and we plead for them with thine all-wise and gracious Spirit! Lord, turn them, and they shall be turned! By their conversion, prove that a true revival has commenced tonight! Let it spread through all our households, and then run from church to church till the whole of Christendom shall be ablaze with the heaven-descended fire! Let us pray.