

A Call to Personal Revival

For many years, I have told students in our ministry school that the greatest challenge they will face is not learning to teach or **preach** well or to administrate or **evangelize** or walk in the Spirit's power or raise funds or whatever else is needed for effective ministry.

Instead, the greatest challenge for those of us in ministry, not to mention for all believers, is to maintain a solid, consistent, personal devotional life. Failing there, we fail where it counts the most. And yet the more successful the ministry, the harder it can be to break away from the demands and the busyness and simply focus our attention on meeting with the Lord.

Recently, after completing another whirlwind ministry schedule (teaching from 9-6 for three straight days, doing two hours of live radio in the middle of two of those days, plus writing at night), I met with two of our grads, who had with them a book called *Personal Revival*, written by my friend S.J. Hill.

They reminded me that I had written the foreword to the book, and so I opened it, saying to them half-jokingly that I wanted to see if I was convicted by my own words. I was!

Back in 1999, I wrote, "If there is one thing I have learned in the last 28 years it is that everything flows out of our personal relationship with the Lord, that the inner life is more essential than the outward life, that our private walk with God is more important than our public ministry for God, that personal **revival** takes precedence over corporate **revival**. After all, the Body of Christ is made up of individuals, and it will never be stronger as a unit than it is individually.

"Yet it is so tempting to put all our emphasis on the works of ministry—preaching, teaching, pastoring, leading worship, leading a home group, witnessing, visiting the sick, being

godly parents, going on missions trips, making disciples—and it is so easy to neglect our private devotion to the Lord. (A more subtle temptation is to spend all our private time in **prayer** and the Word preparing for our public, outward ministry responsibilities.) What about intimacy with Jesus for the sake of intimacy? What about deepening our relationship with the Master simply for the sake of that relationship? What about pursuing the imitation of God in our lives as a goal in itself and not just as a tool for more effective **ministry**?

“The problem, of course, is that the responsibilities of life and ministry often carry us along with the force of their demands, driving us *to action and away from* devotion, pushing us to work for the Lord but pulling us away from waiting on the Lord. How can we resist this tendency? How can we make our relationship with God the highest priority of our lives? How can we experience personal **revival**, and how can we sustain that life of passion, fire, and renewal?

“Of course, our works for the Lord *are* important. We are called to win souls, to set captives free, to bear fruit that will last, to make an impact for the King. But if our foundations are not secure and our roots are not deep, many of our works will go up in flames.

“You see, it is possible to backslide while preaching to thousands. It is possible to grow cold while serving in a red-hot **revival**. It is possible to leave your first love while working for Jesus on the mission field ... and so we must learn to maintain personal revival in the valley as well as on the mountain top.”

One of the most striking passages in the Gospels is found in Luke 5, where, as a result of Jesus’ miracles, “great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and **pray**” (Luke 5:15-16).

How extraordinary. These people wanted to hear what Jesus had to say, and they needed to be healed. And Jesus had what they needed. And He was often moved by compassion to heal the sick, which would have pulled Him to the crowds, not away from them. Yet “he would withdraw to desolate places and **pray**.”

What does this say to us, especially those of us who seem to have an endless stream of people to minister to and needs to meet? (All this has only been multiplied in the digital age and through social media. The Lord once said to me, “Why do you have time to answer all your emails, but you don’t have time for Me?” Today, who can even answer all the emails?)

If Jesus could break away from the needs of the crowds and **pray**, why can’t we? If meeting with His Father was more important to Jesus than meeting with the crowds (or being with family or friends or working a job), why isn’t it more important to us? And if He needed that time alone with God, don’t we need it a thousand times more?

Note well what Luke records next: “On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal” (v. 17).

The Lord’s empowered **ministry** flowed directly out of His time with His Father, and, more importantly, He did not lose intimacy with His Father for the sake of a successful **ministry**. And while it is true that we are called to sacrifice many things in our service for the Lord, one of those things is not our intimate, personal relationship with Him.

So, let’s search our hearts and ask ourselves a simple question: What is the most important thing of all, and are we putting that first?

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