

Choosing Brokenness

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The small band of church leaders had been praying earnestly for revival in their community—a village on the Isle of Lewis, the largest isle of the Outer Hebrides, just off the coast of Scotland. They were particularly burdened for the young people of the island who had no interest in spiritual matters and scorned the things of God.

For 18 months they met—three nights a week, praying through the night, right on into the early hours of the morning, beseeching God to come and visit in revival. But there was no evidence of any change.

Then one night, a young deacon rose to his feet, opened his Bible, and read from Psalm 24: “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart . . . He shall receive the blessing from the Lord” (vv. 3–5, kjv).

Facing the men around him, this young man said, “Brethren, it seems to me to be just so much ‘humbbug’ to be waiting and praying as we are, if we ourselves are not rightly related to God.”

There in the straw, the men knelt and humbly confessed their sins to the Lord. Within a short period of time, God began to pour out His Spirit in an extraordinary awakening that shook the entire island.

Before its impact can be felt in a home, a church, or a nation, revival must first be experienced on a personal level in the hearts of men and women who have encountered God in a fresh way.

And the single greatest hindrance to our experiencing personal revival is our unwillingness to humble ourselves and confess our desperate need for His mercy.

Programmed for Happiness

Our generation has been programmed to pursue happiness, wholeness, affirmation, and cures for our hurt feelings and damaged psyches. But God is not as interested in these ends as we are. He is more committed to making us holy than making us happy. And there is only one pathway to holiness—one road to genuine revival—and that is the pathway of humility or brokenness.

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The Scripture makes it clear that this is the number one prerequisite to meeting God in revival. “For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly’” (Isa. 57:15, NIV).

We often think of revival as a time of great joy, blessing, fullness, and celebration. And so it will be in its fullness. But the problem is that we want a painless Pentecost . . . a “laughing” revival. We forget that God’s ways are not our ways, that the way up is down.

You and I will never meet God in revival until we first meet Him in brokenness. That does not mean, as some think, having a gloomy countenance or being morbidly introspective. Nor can it be equated with deeply emotional experiences. It is possible to shed buckets of tears without ever experiencing a moment of brokenness. Further, brokenness is not the same as being deeply hurt by tragic circumstances. A person may have experienced many deep hurts and tragedies without being broken.

Brokenness is not a feeling; rather, it is a choice, an act of the will. It is not primarily a one-time experience or crisis (though there may be crisis points in the process of brokenness); rather, it is an ongoing, continual lifestyle.

Brokenness is a lifestyle of agreeing with God about the true condition of our heart and life, as He sees it. It is a lifestyle of unconditional, absolute surrender of our will to the will of God—a heart attitude that says, “Yes, Lord!” to whatever God says. Brokenness means the shattering of our self-will, so that the life and Spirit of the Lord Jesus may be released through us. It is our response of humility and obedience to the conviction of the Word and the Spirit of God.

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Scripture provides us with numerous examples of broken people. Interestingly, these examples are often set in contrast to people who were not broken. In every case, both individuals had sinned. The difference was not so much in the nature of their sin, but in their response when confronted with it.

For example, two kings sat on a throne. One king, in a fit of passion, committed adultery with his neighbor’s wife, and then plotted to have his neighbor killed. Yet, when the story of his life was told, this man was called “a man after God’s own heart.” By contrast, his predecessor’s sin was relatively insignificant—he was only

guilty of incomplete obedience. But it cost him his kingdom, his life, and his family. What was the difference?

When King Saul was confronted with his sin, he defended and excused himself, blamed others, and tried to cover up both the sin and its consequences. In short, his response revealed a proud, unbroken heart. On the other hand, when King David was faced with his sin, he was willing to acknowledge his failure, to accept personal responsibility for his wrongdoing, and repent of his sin. His response was that of a humble, broken man. And his was the heart God honored.

Brokenness Brings Blessings

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3)—i.e., the “broken ones,” those who recognize that they are spiritually bankrupt and poverty-stricken. God’s Word teaches that brokenness brings a number of blessings.

1. God draws near to the broken ones. He lifts up those who are humble, but stiff-arms those who are proud.
2. New life is released through our brokenness. On the eve of His crucifixion, as He broke the bread and distributed it to His disciples, Jesus declared, “This is my body, which is broken for you” (1 Cor. 11:24, KJV). His death on the cross released eternal life for us. When we are willing to be broken, His abundant life can flow through us to others.
3. Brokenness brings an increased capacity for love and worship. The “sinner woman,” who anointed Jesus’ feet with her tears and precious ointment, was a broken woman (Luke 7:37–38). As a result, she was free to lavish her love and worship on the Lord Jesus, without restraint, without being bound by the opinions of those who watched. Some of us are not really free to love and worship the Lord Jesus with all our hearts. Perhaps that is because we are not broken. We are still more concerned about what others think than about the object of our devotion.
4. Brokenness brings increased fruitfulness, for God uses things that are broken. When Jacob’s natural strength was broken down at Peniel, for example, God was able to clothe him with spiritual power. When the young boy’s five loaves were broken, they were supernaturally multiplied and became sufficient to feed a multitude. And when Jesus’ body was broken on Calvary, eternal life was released for the salvation of the world.
5. The fruit of brokenness is seen in revival—the release of God’s Spirit through our personal and corporate brokenness. During the Welsh Revival of 1904–05, the song that was heard frequently from the lips of

broken, contrite hearts was, “Bend me lower, lower, down at Jesus’ feet.”

Where Do We Start?

We must come to see God as He really is, for the closer we get to God, the more we will see our own need in the light of His holiness.

In the fifth chapter of Isaiah, the great prophet pronounces well-deserved woes on the materialistic, sensual, proud, immoral people of his day. Over and over he cries out, “Woe to them . . .” But then Isaiah comes face-to-face with the holiness of God, and his next words are, “Woe to me!” (Isa. 6:5). The broken man or woman is more conscious of the corruption in his own breast than in the heart of his neighbor.

Having seen God for who He is, we must cry out to Him for mercy. Learning to acknowledge and verbalize our spiritual need to God is essential to a lifestyle of brokenness. The broken person does not blame others. His heart attitude is, “It’s not my brother nor my sister, but it’s me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

The broken person is able to verbalize his needs to others, as well. There is no brokenness where there is no openness. Almost without exception, the greatest victories over sin and temptation that I have experienced have been won when I was willing to humble myself and confess my need to a mature believer who could pray for me and help hold me accountable to obey God.

Ultimately, brokenness is a matter of surrendering control of our life to God. The heart that has been emptied of itself and broken of its willfulness is the heart that will experience the filling and the reviving of our glorious, holy God, who humbled Himself, that He might lift us up.