

THE UNSEEN GUEST

Chapter 8 – The Best of Times

When the church is functioning at its best, when it's on fire for the Lord, the presence of Christ is the focus of corporate life. In such a church, it's not the building the people are most proud of. The pastor isn't the personality whose name dominates all conversations. The denominational program isn't what's pushed most. It is *Christ*, the Unseen Guest, who is the center of interest.

Overly idealistic? Travel back in your mind to the early church. What excited the people then? It was Christ, Christ and His Kingdom, Christ and His Kingship.

I don't want to be impossibly naïve about the first-century church. First Corinthians reveals how the believers quarreled about being disciples of Apollos or Cephas or Paul (1 Corinthians 1:12). But the apostle chided them: "Let's end this right now. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?"

Maybe they were more like us back then than we want to admit. Even with Paul's strong affirmation that Jesus was the one crucified, the only one who could forgive sin, with passing years Christ's importance began to fade. And too often in the dimming light of forgetfulness, matters such as...

- holding conventions on doctrinal purity;
- building cathedrals and parish churches;
- resolving church/state issues;
- trying heretics;
- going on crusades;
- establishing schools for clergy;
- opening up the religious arts;
- church politics;
- solving male/female roles;
- getting involved in social issues;
- participating in intrachurch bowling leagues

...started occupying front-and-center attention. Eventually, in such situations, Christ just wasn't talked about or thought about that much. Far too often, church history involves a discouraging downward spiral of spiritual life that has been expressed in repetitive cycles.

But this is true also: During the best of times, the years when the spiritual fire burned most brightly, the presence of Christ was the dominant feature. While judging current success in our

churches, we do well to compare ourselves not to other churches but to times when there was this overwhelming sense of divine spiritual presence.

Though Jesus was not physically present, His people acted as though He had visited them bodily:

- They *worshiped* Him.
- They were careful to show Christ-like *love* to one another, as He commanded.
- They scrupulously avoided His archenemy, Satan, and shunned all that the evil one stood for. They were a *holy* people.
- They *served* Christ with gladness and self-sacrifice, considering this a great privilege.
- They paid close attention to what He said in *Scripture* and through the preached word—and they obeyed what they read and heard.
- They spent quality time talking to Him in *prayer*.
- They *told their friends* about Him.
- They felt that, regarding the church, these were the *best times possible* to be living.

Let me give an illustration. Most historians would say that the first 50 years of colonial life in our land were characterized by deep earnestness and spiritual passion. By the beginning of the 1700s, however, the fires of religious fervor had begun to die.

In 1721, Dr. Increase Mather, a Puritan pastor and former president of Harvard University, penned these sad words:

I am now in my eighty-third year, and having been for sixty-five years a preacher of the gospel, I cannot but be in the disposition of those ancient men who had seen the foundation of the first house, and wept with a loud voice to see what a change the temple had upon it. The children of New England are, or once were, the children of godly men. What did our fathers come into this wilderness for? Not to gain estates, as men do now, but for religion, and that they might leave their children in a hopeful way of being truly religious. Oh, degenerate new England, what are thou come to at this day? How art those sins become common in thee that were once not so much as heard of in this land?

Thankfully, the darkness about which Mather wrote proved to be that which preceded the dawn. In 1734, Jonathan Edwards began a series of God-anointed sermons in his church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards was one of two key individuals the Lord used mightily during that revival now called the Great Awakening. An intellectual giant who had begun the study

of Latin at age six, entered Yale at 13, and graduated at 16, Edwards with his preaching touched off what would prove to be a major work of the Spirit.

Yet as one writer put it, this was “just a flicker of greater things to come” when the second key figure, 25-year-old George Whitefield, a colleague of the Wesleys in England, burst upon the American scene. “If Edwards touched off the fire, Whitefield swept the white-hot flames throughout all of New England and into the south.”

But even before revival spread like wildfire, the early signs of revival were appearing in churches such as the one Edwards pastured. Christ’s presence was keenly felt.

In his prolific writings, Edwards touched on specifics. “Everyone [was] earnestly intent on the public worship”—measurement number one:

It has been observable that there has been scarce any part of divine worship wherein good men amongst us have had grace so drawn forth, and their hearts so lifted up in the ways of God as in singing his praises. ... They were evidently wont to sing with unusual elevation of heart and voice, which made the duty pleasant indeed.

Regarding the importance of Christian love in this colonial spiritual regeneration, Edwards wrote, “If the spirit at work among a people operates as a spirit of love, it is a sure sign that it is the spirit of God”—measurement number two.

In another place, Edwards asked, “Would the devil make us more careful to discern what is sinful and more careful to guard against it? This is what has been happening. Why then do people question that the spirit that has been operating is any but the spirit of God?”—holiness, measurement number three.

God’s people getting involved in ministry is the fourth measurement we have listed. Of this, Edwards affirms, “The congregation was alive in God’s service.”

During the Great Awakening, the written and spoken Word came alive—revival measurement number five. Edwards comments on this:

Every hearer [was] eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.

As the Lord moved there was a boldness in prayer requesting that the Spirit come in even greater power—measurement number six. To continue the awakening, Edwards and others called for concerts of prayer “every quarter of the year.”

It is estimated that during the Great Awakening there were between 25,000 and 50,000 converts—measurement number seven. Percentage-wise, that would be roughly equivalent to 25 million converts on the American scene today!

Christ was present in His church during these historic days, and evidences of this were worship, love, holiness, service, obedience to Scripture, prayer, and evangelistic outreach—all the themes that have been covered in this book so far. But there is one last ingredient that hasn't been developed. Measurement number eight is an intense sense of well-being. During revival, God's people believe that what is going on is truly life as it should be lived, that no better life is possible than one lived in the very presence of the risen Christ.

On December 21, 1743, Edwards wrote:

Ever since the great work of God that was wrought here about nine years ago, there has been a great, abiding alteration in this town in many respects. There has been vastly more religion kept up in the town, among all sorts of persons, in religious exercises, and in common conversation, than used to be before. There has remained a more general seriousness and decency in attending the public worship. I suppose the town has been in no measure so free from vice, for any long time together, for this sixty years, as it has this nine years past. There has also been an evident alteration with respect to a charitable spirit to the poor.

On December 21, 1743, Edwards wrote:

Behold, the Lord whom we have sought, has suddenly come to his temple. The dispensation of grace we are now under, is certainly such as neither we nor our fathers have seen, and in some circumstances so wonderful, I believe there has not been the like since after our Lord's ascension. The apostolic times seem to have returned to us.

When the people of the church again know the presence of the Lord, they experience the best of days. The point is so obvious. Yet for some reason it helps to spell it out.

Is it a disadvantage or an advantage for individuals to have Jesus as a close friend? Is it the sinner or the saint who knows the good life? Is Christ's yoke heavy or is it light? I'm not asking for answers like those you might give on a Bible quiz, but for where you are in your heart of hearts. Does the pretender to the throne know what's best for you, or is the path of joy the one mapped out by your true King?

Regarding the church, have the glory days been when God's people selfishly figured out what they wanted and pursued it, or when they were obedient to Christ's commands? Did distancing itself from the divine presence bring the church freedom or bondage? When life returned, when there was revival, was the result cursing or blessing?

How fascinating it has been in my studies of literature on awakenings to read the remarks of people in the midst of revival. Their comments always convey excitement, delight, gratitude, and even a touch of awe. It's like you can almost conclude what is said each time with the words, "This has to be the best life has to offer."

I am aware that spiritual awakenings can't be humanly engineered, but that doesn't prohibit us from attempting to experience a little of the classic characteristics of revival—the worship, the love, the sense of victory over sin, the delight in service, and so on. Experiencing some of these realities could create a hunger for another such outpouring, leading to a common dedication of ourselves to praying boldly for God's work among us.

How desperately we need this! I believe that even sampling Christ's presence in the church will create a longing for more and more of the same.

So we must learn how to worship and teach one another how to delight in it. Buy a hymnal. Even if you can't sing, read and reread the songs, especially those addressed to Christ.

Allow the hymns about His church to capture your heart.

Work at making it a habit to extend King's love to others. Put away petty attitudes, jealousies, gossip, neglect.

Don't give an inch to the enemy. Determine to be Christ-like in your attitude regarding sin.

Never stop improving your ability to serve your Lord. Surprise Him with all you can do on His behalf.

As Paul wrote to Timothy, be a master handler of God's Word. But don't just study it—obey it!

Develop a more mature system of prayer than just keeping a running list in your head. Start a journal or a prayer notebook.

Go ahead. Share with someone else what Christ means to you. Tell somebody.

Do the things you would do were Jesus bodily present, and see if you don't say, "For me, life is better now than it has been for a long time. I never thought it could be so good." Enjoy spiritual well-being.

When properly understood, revival is nothing to fear. If the word implied unchecked emotionalism, I could understand why people would react against it; but emotionalism is an unfair description. More than anything else, revival means that Christ has again drawn near to His people, and that's always a happening that's wonderful for those who love Him. How can life be better than when it is infused with Christ's divine presence?

I believe revival is what all true Christians desire, even if they aren't aware of what their longing is called. After all, revival is the chance to start all over again and to do it right this time.

It's a brand-new beginning—a regeneration—for the individual, for the family, for the church, for the community, for the nation. What could possibly be better than that? I know I long for it.

At my office, there's a large *National Geographic* map stretched across the top of my desk under the protective glass. It includes most of Canada, all the United States, and the top portion of Mexico. I've become very familiar with it, because I do so much work at that desk.

When I work at home, my small study is in the very center of our house. The room is only 7 feet by 11 feet, but I like it. The best feature is that, by closing the study door, I can shut myself off from the demands of my more-immediate world and be alone there with the Lord. Everyone should have such a room—a prayer room, a family chapel.

Sometimes in the study at home when I close my eyes in prayer, the outline of the map from my office desk returns to mind. Then it's as though, when I kneel to pray, I'm viewing all of North America, and my normal concern is intensified for this massive geographic area into which I broadcasted for so many years.

Often I visualize dark, angry clouds hovering over much of our continent. Even so, I'm able to discern what appear to be tiny fires in various places. Unfortunately, there aren't many, and they're widely separated. While some barely flicker, the last embers of a once-bright blaze, others still burn with great constancy. But the longer I pray, the more tiny flashes I'm able to find. This is not unlike observing the heavens at night; the longer one looks, the greater the number of stars that can be seen.

In my vision of this strategic part of Earth, I'm aware that these bright lights are churches where the life of Christ is manifested. *But can't there be more?* my heart whispers. Those threatening clouds will extinguish some of the weaker fires.

As if in response to my prayers, some flames actually leap up and burn more brightly—small in number, yes, but intense and pure. Alas, the adverse elements begin to move in concentration against them. Watching this dark power forming and knowing what is soon to be unleashed, I become discouraged. "Why even pray? These burning testimonies haven't a chance."

But wait! Beneath the onslaught of foul winds, sparks now dance out from the flames under attack. Here now, over there again, and then in new places they spring up. Defiantly, the little fires seem to shout to the storms, "All your blustering will be counterproductive, utterly self-defeating, only fanning holy flames."

This imaginative development encourages my intercession. "More fires," I pray. "God, if we just had more fires—hundreds, thousands of them, even tens of thousands. With more fires, the possibility for holy flame in these lands becomes reachable." I strategize: "There need to be ignition points everywhere, each catching and spreading and feeding one another, so many there won't be enough clouds and contrary winds or hostile rains to extinguish all the blazing lights."

Then, as if in response to my thought, which hardly takes long enough time to be called a prayer, numbers of areas blaze brighter—more starlike points flame, north and south, east and

west—further increasing my faith. “Look, it’s happening, Lord!” I cry. “Please keep the miracle alive!”

“Come and pray with me,” I call in my prayers to unseen friends—brothers and sisters. I don’t know many of them by name, but I do know our hearts and minds are as one. “Do you see what I’m seeing?”

in my spirit I hear their voices join with mine; soon their intercession can be observed. For the first time, a concentration of flames combines with another nearby. The action is dramatic, lighting the area with intense heat. Cheers unite our prayer vigil. All of us are caught up with the intense work of intercession, and in some strange way we know that what’s happening is fueled by a force totally beyond us.

I attempt to identify cities that might be involved. Denver. Minneapolis. Toronto. Isn’t that Baltimore? This must be Phoenix down here. Oh, if only a true phoenix is alight—a flaming new spiritual life rising out of earlier ashes.

The warfare intensifies. A great, hostile wind now whips and blows against an area representing several countries, and the strong fires burning there dim. But when the contrary force has spent itself, the incendiary fellowship flares up again. Before long, it is brighter than before and noticeably expanded.

With this, a turning point has been reached, a key defeat wielded against the haters of holy fire. And suddenly, as though a signal has been flashed, there is a dramatic acceleration of flame. New burning torches appear, brighter ones, everywhere on the continent—Canada, most of the States, even areas of Mexico.

I gasp, “Lord, another holy conflagration that won’t burn out for years to come. Oh, may it be so!”

The time is crucial. To ensure victory, I and my prayer partners must stay at our prayer posts. “Before too long,” I tell God, “it should all catch. It’s going to be impossible to stop what’s happening. Come now, you foul winds, blow some more! You only fan our flames!” And then—

Well, the phone rings.

Or someone opens the study door and says, “The neighbor kids want to know if you can read them another story.”

Or I hear, “Sweetheart, can you please feed the dog tonight? I did it yesterday.”

And I’m back, back into the more immediate of the two worlds in which I live.

But I don’t forget. I don’t ever forget what I saw when my eyes were closed and I knelt over North America in my prayers. I cannot forget this vision of what still could be.

Personally, my heart is hot for more of the things of the Lord. With my wife, Karen, I believe our marriage has been permanently branded by Christ. I trust that we display His flaming mark on our lives. Nor do we feel alone; we’re joined by countless others, couples and singles, who pray:

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
Till I am wholly Thine,
Till all this earthly part of me
glows with Thy fire divine.*

But the vision calls for more than just individuals or couples or families here and there. It requires the vast extended people of God, the church, to experience the sacred flames.

So often in Scripture, God demonstrated His presence by fire. To Abraham, it was a smoking pot and a flaming torch as God's Spirit passed between the two halves of this man's sacrifice. To Moses, it was a burning bush. To the children of Israel fleeing from Egypt, the Lord was in the pillar of fire; in their worship, God's presence was at the altar in the time when the burnt offerings were made. Elijah was called home to God in a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire. Elisha asked God to give his servant eyes to see the mountains full of horses and chariots of fire. At Pentecost, tongues of fire rested on each gathered in that special room when they were shaken with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And I believe, in the end-time prior to the return of His Son, that our Lord desires His church once again to know the best of times and to burn brightly in sacred revival flames.

May it be so. I pray on.

For Discussion and Reflection

1. Some people say the Bible predicts the world will get worse and worse before Jesus returns, and therefore, we shouldn't expect another great revival. Do you agree or disagree?
2. Many Christians have positive feelings about revival personalities such as Luther, Wesley, Finney, Moody, and so on, but they have negative feelings about revival itself. Why is this?
3. When is the last time you recall hearing someone in your church pray for revival?
4. What changes would be made if Christ became your permanent houseguest? Restated, what would it be like if you became more and more aware of the presence of Christ in your home? How would revival affect your home life?
5. In what ways have revival truths started to affect your personal life? Name a specific area where the Lord is personally wanting improvement. Do you need help in knowing how to make the necessary changes?

Readings

“Times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.” The thought surely opens up for us a mental vista of the possibilities of blessing through seeking God’s presence—possibilities often hidden by the thick clouds of our own great ignorance. To be in the presence of the Lord is to be revived. When a community of believers is brought low before the presence of the Lord, when the very air that they breathe appears to be supercharged with the sense of his presence—that is the beginning of revival. It is revival. . . . I have witnessed many revivals of God’s people—both individuals and companies. The Holy Spirit’s working always brought a fulness of joy. Cups ran over. Worries disappeared. When Love, and Joy, and Peace came in at the door, Misery went up the chimney, search parties failing to locate it afterwards. “Delight thyself in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Ps. 37:4).

— J. Edwin Orr, *Times of Refreshing: 10,000 Miles of Miracle Through Canada*, pp. 118-119

[The crucial test of the genuineness of the 1800 Awakening was not the size of the crowds or the degree of excitement, but the spiritual fruits, as Dr. George A. Baxter affirmed.]

On my way, I was informed by settlers on the road that the character of Kentucky was entirely changed, and that they were as remarkable for sobriety as they had formerly been for dissoluteness and immorality. And indeed I found Kentucky to appearances the most moral place I had ever seen. A profane expression was hardly ever heard. A religious awe seemed to pervade the country. Upon the whole, I think that the revival in Kentucky the most extraordinary thing that has ever visited the Church of Christ.

— J. Edwin Orr, *The Eager Feet: Evangelical Awakenings, 1790-1830*, p. 63

The characteristics of the work of grace [in Scotland] during the years 1839 to 1841, were thus noticed in an address from Mr. [William C.] Burns’s own pen, bearing the date September 1, 1841:

‘Perhaps you have heard of the wonderful things which the great God has been doing for us in Scotland. The servants of Satan have reviled God’s blessed work; and I wish to tell you something of the truth about it. You know that many people come from the church the same as they went to it; the Word does not touch their consciences, and they remain under the power of sin and Satan, of death and hell. This used to be very much the way among us until lately; but the God of love has visited us, and poured out His life-giving Spirit

upon the dead souls of men. In some places you might see the solemn sight of hundreds weeping for their sins, and seeking to give up their hearts to Jesus. And, ah! What a sweet change has taken place on many! The high looks of the proud have been brought down; dead formalists have become living Christians; worshippers of Mammon have been changed into lovers of God; the blasphemous tongues of the profane have been made to sing God's praise; drunkards have cast from them the cup of devils, and have taken the cup of salvation; unclean persons, who used to be the slaves of lust, the drudges of the devil, the very dregs of humankind, are now sitting the feet of Jesus; and some, who were ringleaders in every form of sin, are now bold and open, and unflinching in the service of Christ, even as once they were shameless, brazenfaced, and steel-hearted in the service of the Wicked One. Many, who formerly were dead in sin, are now living in the grace of Jesus, in the love of God, in the communion of the Spirit, and in the hope of heaven!

At the present time, when many are stirred up to lay hold on the God of Pentecost, there is a special interest and pleasure in looking back to those days of his right hand—days which, during succeeding times of deadness, it became almost saddening to recall.

The instruments then employed were ever made to feel that the entire power which accompanied the word resided in God the Holy Ghost, honoured as the living Jehovah, specially addressed in believing prayer, and shed forth in glorious power. Mr. Burns was only in his twenty-fifth year in 1839-40, and did indeed ascribe all the glory of the effects of his preaching to God alone. The written Word was magnified. Sometimes inquirers would tell that what had been used to awaken them was the Scripture read or the psalm sung. The sanctuary was felt to be the very house of God. Reasons and excuses for absence, at other times insurmountable, how quickly they gave way! Daily labour was got over in time; and through the winter dark, or by the moonlight on the snow, eager hundreds were pressing to its gates, some still like burdened Christian, others rejoicing in the Savior newly found, and careless ones, who came from curiosity alone, had to sit and think, silent and still, for an hour in the crowd, till the service began. That solemn stillness was often followed by such requests for prayer as those which have become so common now—believers asking prayer for unconverted relatives, and awakened sinners asking it for themselves.

— M. F. Barbour, editor, *Revival Sermons: Notes of Addresses by William C. Burns*, pp. 8-10

A convert in Rochester, New York, left a description of [Charles] Finney's revival ministry [1842] in that city. ... He wrote: "The whole community was stirred. Religion was the topic of conversation, in the house, in the shop, in the office, and on the street. ... The only theater in the city was converted into a livery stable; the only circus into a soap and candle factory. Grog shops were closed; the Sabbath was honored; the sanctuaries were thronged with happy worshipers; a new impulse was given to every philanthropic enterprise; the fountains of benevolence were opened, and men lived to do good."

The report continues: "It is worth of special notice that a large number of leading men of the place were among the converts—the lawyers, the judges, physicians, merchants, bankers, and master mechanics. These classes were more moved from the very first than any other. Tall oaks were bowed as by the blast of the hurricane. ...

"It is not too much to say that the whole character of the city was changed by that revival," wrote this eyewitness. "Most of the leaders of society being converted, and exerting a controlling influence in social life, in business, and in civil affairs, religion was enthroned as it has been in few places. ... Even the courts and the prisons bore witness to its blessed effects. There was a wonderful falling off in crime. The courts had little to do, and the jail was nearly empty for years afterward."

— V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret: Twenty Transformed Lives That Reveal a Touch of Eternity*, p. 57

Our religion is like fire, again, because of its *tremendous energy and its rapid advance*. Who shall be able to estimate the force of fire? Our forefathers standing on this side of the river, as they gazed many years ago upon the old city of London wrapped in flame, must have wondered with great astonishment as they saw a cottage and palace, church and hall, monument and cathedral, all succumbing to the tongue of flame. It must be a wonderful sight, if one could safely see it, to behold a prairie rolling along its great sheets of flame, or to gaze upon Vesuvius when it is spouting away at its utmost force. When you deal with fire, you cannot calculate; you are among the imponderables and the immeasurables. I wish we thought of that when we are speaking of religion. You cannot calculate concerning its spread. How many years would it take to convert the world? asks somebody. Sir, it need not take ten minutes, if God so willed it; because as fire, beyond all reckoning, will sometimes, when circumstances are congenial, suddenly break out and spread, so will truth. Truth is not a mechanism—and does not depend upon engineering. A thought in one mind, why not the same thought in fifty? That thought in fifty minds, why not in fifty thousand? The truth which affects a village, and stirs it from end to end, why not a town, a city, why not a nation? Why not all nations? God may, when he wills it, bring all human minds into such a condition that one single text such as this, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all

acceptation, that Christ Jesus, came into the world to save sinners," may set all hearts on a blaze. ... I can believe anything about fire. Let a man tell me that in a house just now a bundle of rags have begun to burn; let him tell me in five minutes that the shop is on fire; let him tell me in five minutes more that it is blazing through the shutters, or that the next story is burning, or that the roof is coming in, I could believe it all. Fire can do anything. So with the gospel of Jesus; given but an earnest preacher, given but the truth fully declared, given an earnest people, determined to propagate the gospel, and I can understand a nation converted to God, ay, and all the nations of the earth suddenly shaken with the majesty of truth.

— C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon During the Year 1869*, pp. 81-82

Thou Christ of burning, cleansing flame,
Send the fire!
Thy Blood-bought gift today we claim,
Send the fire!

Look down and see this waiting host,
Give us the promised Holy Ghost,
We want another Pentecost,
Send the fire!

God of Elijah, hear our cry:
Send the fire!
To make us fit to live or die,
Send the fire!

To burn up every trace of sin,
To bring the light and glory in,
The revolution now begin,
Send the fire!

'Tis fire we want, for fire we plead,
Send the fire!
The fire will meet our every need,
Send the fire!

For strength to ever do the right,
For grace to conquer in the fight,
For power to walk the world in white,
Send the fire!

To make our weak hearts strong and brave,
Send the fire!
To live a dying world to save,
Send the fire!

O see us on Thy altar lay
Our lives, our all, this very day;
To crown the offering now we pray,
Send the fire!

— General William Booth, in Ted S. Rendall,
Fire in the Church, p. 96