

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 22, 2012**

GOD'S WAY TO REFORMATION AND REVIVAL

Isaiah 44:1-8

Last Sunday, as we began to consider God's way to reformation and revival, we looked at the opening verses of Isaiah 43, where the Lord speaks a message of grace to Israel, reaffirming the promise of His presence, protection, and unfailing love for His often wayward, unfaithful, covenant people. Today I want you to look with me at what the Lord says to His people in Isaiah 44. So, please turn in your Bible to Isaiah 44:1-8, and let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

A LOOK BACK AT LAST SUNDAY'S MESSAGE

Because we are a forgetful people (some of us more than others, of course) it is a good thing from time to time to be reminded of what we already know. So, let's begin today with a look back at some things we noted last Sunday. We noted, among other things, that, during the time of Isaiah's ministry as a prophet or spokesman of God, both Israel and Judah, the two branches of God's covenant people, desperately needed both reformation and revival. And so do we. So does America. So does the church across this land and around the world. Individually and in our life together here at Faith, as a fellowship of believers whose stated purpose is "*to know Christ and to make Him known,*" we need both reformation and revival.

We noted the distinction Ray Ortlund, Jr. makes between reformation and revival. Reformation, he says, is the recovery of God's purpose for us, while revival is the recovery of God's life in us. Reformation, as the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century understood, is not a once-for-all-time happening. Just as the covenant nation of Israel needed to experience both reformation and revival repeatedly in Old Testament times, the church in every time and place and culture is in need of ongoing examination and reformation, always under the authority of the Word of God – the foundational authority of which must never be nullified or even compromised, because the Bible is the supreme, final, and the only infallible rule for faith and life. Every generation stands in need of both reformation and revival. Not one or the other, but both. And ours is no exception.

True reformation, Ortlund says, is "God renewing in our hearts a passionate clarity about His purpose for us." In other words, you might say, reformation is "purpose-driven." It is about recovering or regaining a sense of God's purpose for our lives, with a passion to serve and fulfill His kingdom purposes in our generation. True reformation, Ortlund continues, "is God reawakening in us a love for His truth and His standards" – at the heart of which must be a genuine love for God Himself, since the first and greatest commandment of all, Jesus said, is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength (Mark 12:30). True reformation "is God preparing us for the display of His glorious salvation as we reshape every aspect of our lives (and every aspect of) our churches to that end" – "to the praise of His glorious grace," as Paul writes in Ephesians 1:6.

God's ultimate purpose, says Ortlund, is "to magnify Himself for the glory of His grace in our everlasting joy. As His glory grips our hearts right now, we are reformed and renewed to live (purposeful, God-honoring) lives in a God-trivializing world." At the heart of it all are the grace and glory of God, "for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36).

ISRAEL AS GOD'S SERVANT PEOPLE

I want you to see what God is saying through Isaiah in a slightly wider context. Isaiah 42 begins in verses 1-9 with the first of four "Servant Songs" in the Book of Isaiah, all of which find their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who came to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). The other "Servant Songs" are in Isaiah 49:1-13; 50:4-9; and most famously in 52:13 – 53:12, where the sacrificial death of Jesus, the "Suffering Servant," on our behalf is foreshadowed in vivid detail.

While the "servant" motif usually points to a single person and finds its fulfillment in Jesus, sometimes "servant" refers to God's covenant people, the nation of Israel, as a whole. And Israel, unfortunately, failed miserably in its mission as God's servant people. In Isaiah 42:19-20, Israel's identity and failure as God's servant come into view. There the Lord says:

Who is blind but my servant,
and deaf like the messenger I send?
Who is blind like the one committed to me,
blind like the servant of the Lord?
You have seen many things, but paid no attention;
Your ears are open, but you hear nothing.

Israel as God's chosen servant had become blind to God's purpose and deaf to God's voice. They had turned away from God and His ways. They would not obey His laws. They failed in their mission, which was to show the world how good, how beautiful, and how glorious it is to live all of life under God's sovereign and gracious rule (42:21). In a sense, that is exactly our mission today as God's people. It is the mission of the church.

You know what happened to both Israel and Judah. They failed to carry out their mission from God, their God-given purpose, and they went into national exile, one at the hands of Assyria and the other at the hands of Babylon. Going into exile, a different kind of exile, of course, can happen to the church as well, as Ortlund points out. And, at different times in church history, *has* happened to churches that follow the culture instead of following God.

BUT NOW

Israel failed miserably in its mission. But how did God respond? What did God say to His people? Listen to Isaiah 43:1:

But now, this is what the Lord says –
 He who created you, O Jacob,
 He who formed you, O Israel ...

Did you catch those first two words? *But now*. They introduce God’s message of comforting grace and redeeming love for His people that we read last Sunday. *But now*. And Isaiah 44 begins with the same two words. Near the end of Isaiah 43, beginning at verse 22, the Lord once again exposes the failure of His people to serve Him with their whole hearts. This time it is not their moral and spiritual blindness and deafness, it is the emptiness of their worship. They still did their religious duty, but that’s all it was – a duty. A joyless duty, as Ortlund observes. Their hearts weren’t in it. They went through the motions as do many professing Christians today, but they were bored with worship. They found worship boring – which means, at some level, they found God boring. If we ever find God boring, we’ve got a serious problem. The problem is not with God. The problem is with us.

What can alleviate this problem? What can be done to change this distressing condition? The remedy comes from God Himself. The remedy, in fact, *is* God Himself, who says to Israel: “But now listen (to me) ...” (44:1). Aren’t these beautiful words? *But now*. Once more God speaks grace to His people. And it is only by grace that spiritual refreshment can come. Only by God’s grace can showers of blessing come to a parched and thirsty land. Only God can satisfy the hunger and thirst of the human soul. Only God can pour Himself out upon us with such abundance that we become, as Brian Edwards put it, “a people saturated with God.” Only God by His Spirit can do it.

Don’t you want to be “saturated with God?” Don’t you desire, as Paul prayed in the prayer we looked at together just two Sundays ago from Ephesians 3, to “be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God?” (Ephesians 3:19) I do. And I pray you do. I pray that God will do it in us in our day as He has done it in revivals and spiritual awakenings many times in history past.

Ray Ortlund says that when God brings true revival, notorious sinners become notorious believers. That, he says, is what God does as the magnitude of His grace breaks upon us with reviving power.

WHAT GOD DID IN THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING

Here is an example from history. In 1741, during the First Great Awakening that swept through the American colonies in the 1730s and 40s, Jonathan Edwards wrote a treatise entitled *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* to provide a biblical explanation and defense of the revivals, and to identify the signs of true and false revival. A contemporary of Edwards named William Cooper wrote a preface to Edwards’ work, in which he made these observations about what he called *The Recent Dead and Barren State of the Church* preceding *The Present Extraordinary Pouring Out of the Spirit*: “Now, for a great while, it has been a dead and barren time without fruit in all the churches of the Reformation. The showers of blessing have been restrained. The influence of the Spirit stopped. The Gospel has not had any famous success. Conversions have been rare and dubious. Few sons

and daughters have been born to God. The hearts of Christians are not as lively, warm and refreshed under the ordinances of the Word and sacraments as they have been. The Christian faith," he said, "has been in this sad state in this land for many years ... (with) one or two well-known exceptions. This sad state has been acknowledged by all who have any spiritual awareness. Faithful ministers and serious Christians lament this fact. This sad state of the church is a constant petition in our public prayers."

That is the way it was in New England and throughout the American colonies. It seems as though much the same could be said about the state of the church in many places in America today. But when God in His mercy and grace poured out His Spirit in an extraordinary way bringing the renewed spiritual vitality of true revival to His church and lost sinners to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, remarkable changes took place. Among the changes brought about by this gracious work of God's Spirit, Cooper said, were these: "Some of the *greatest sinners* now appear to be real saints. Drunkards have become temperate. Adulterers (and others engaging in sexual sin) now have pure conduct. Swearers and profane persons have learned to treat the glorious name of the Lord with reverence and honor. *Sensual worldlings* have been made to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

"The *virtuous and civil* have been convinced that morality is not to be relied on for life, and so (are) motivated, to seek the new birth and a vital union with Jesus Christ by faith. *Those who merely profess formal religion* have also been awakened out of their dead formalities when brought under the power of godliness. They have turned from their false confidence and (have come to place) their hope only on the Mediator's righteousness.

"At the same time many of the *children of God* have been greatly quickened and refreshed. They have been awakened out of their slumbering state and moved to diligently make their calling and election sure. They have had special, reviving, and sealing times. This is how extensive ... the divine influence has been at this glorious season."

God is the One who made it happen. Only God can make it happen again. Only God can bring a true and lasting revival that transforms lives and churches and even nations. Even our nation.

THE ONE AND ONLY GOD

Only God can do it, because true revival is a God-thing, and there is no God but the Lord our God. Listen to His own words in Isaiah 44:6:

This is what the Lord says –
Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty:
"I am the first and I am the last;
Apart from me there is no God."

Period. There are lots of counterfeit gods, lots of idols that people worship today, lots of false gods we make in our own image. But there is only one true God – the God who made us, the God who formed each one of us in our mother's womb, the God who loved us from before the

foundation of the world and will never stop loving us, the God who gave the life of His Son for us to redeem us from our sins, the God who knows everything there is to know about us and who calls each of us by name, the God who will never forget us or any of His promises to us, the God who has promised always to be with us and to help us in our time of need, the God who is gracious and loving and holy and wise and faithful and worthy. Worthy of our worship. Worthy of our praise. Worthy of our trust. Worthy of our devotion.. Worthy of our witness. Worthy of our service. Worthy of our love. Apart from Him there is no God.

THE WAY TO REFORMATION AND REVIVAL

The way to reformation and revival both begins and ends with God, because both our life and our purpose come from God, and when we experience the renewal of our spiritual vitality and our purpose as God's people, it is God and God alone to whom all glory and praise belong. In His mercy and grace abounding, God has made us "a people belonging to (Him), that (we) may declare the praises of Him who called (us) out of darkness into His wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

That is God's purpose for your life and mine, and God's purpose for His church.

Does the church in the world today stand in need of reformation and revival? I think the answer is intuitively obvious.

Do we need a heaven-sent reformation and revival in our church? Here at Faith? Isn't the answer to this pretty clear, too?

Maybe, in your life, in your walk with God, you are alive and well spiritually, maturing in faith, hope, and love, growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in Him with all your heart, leaning not on your own understanding, acknowledging Him as Lord in all your ways, and following His lead one step at a time. If this is true for you, praise God for His amazing and glorious grace in your life. And keep on praising Him.

But maybe you're not as passionate about God or the gospel as you once were. Maybe your spiritual temperature could be described as either cold or lukewarm, neither of which is pleasing to God. Maybe you've made some bad choices. Maybe you've let yourself be influenced by the wrong people. Maybe you've allowed a root of bitterness or anger or unforgiveness or some other kind of sin to make its home in your heart. Maybe you've just allowed the things of this world to distract you or to pull you away from God. If any of this is true in your life, the Lord is calling you to come back to Him in a spirit of repentance and renewed faith to experience the spiritual reformation and revival that only He can bring about. His word to you today is a word of grace. But now. Come to Him. Come back to Him. Let God have your life – all of it. For, as D. L. Moody said, He can do more with your life than you can.

May it be so in each of us and all of us, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.