

BEGINNING WITH ME!

"And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes." Daniel 9:3.

More than five hundred years before the Christian era God's covenant people were in a bad way. Their spiritual glory had gone into eclipse. Their temple at Jerusalem lay in melancholy ruin. The people themselves had been driven away into exile in Babylon, where now, for years, they had been stripped of their religious splendor and their national honor.

To make bad matters worse, no one seemed to care too greatly how long this unhappy and unholy situation continued. No one seemed to have any faith that it might come to an end, and the glory of the former times restored.

Yet, now and then, as these dreary years of the captivity dragged along a man would arise with a light in his eye and a longing in his heart. He might be an Ezekiel or, as in this case, a Daniel. What distinguished him from the rest of the Hebrew exiles, what made him stand out from the spiritless or complacent mass, was the concern that raged through his soul over the defeat and dishonor that had stopped God's people in their tracks. Here they were with their spiritual witness muted and their harps on the willows.

Nevertheless, it rightly occurs to a man like Daniel that if God's purpose of mercy and recovery is to be fulfilled, someone must lead out in bringing forth fruits meet for repentance. Someone must lead out in self-searching and self-abasement before the holiness of God. Someone must lead out in the creative refusal to accept defeat as the normal and the inevitable. Someone must lead out in the recognition that even prophesied events, such as the return of Judah from captivity after seventy years, are not the result of bare, blind Fate, but are the consequence of man's obedient response to God's command and God's offer.

This, God would have us see, is the significance of a man like Daniel as he comes to view in our text. "I set my face unto the Lord God!" Never mind whether others are doing it or not. If we all wait for each other, it will never be done. "And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession...." Daniel 9:3-4.

Thus, you see, Daniel was, by many centuries, a forerunner of the aroused Chinese Christian, Cheng Ching-yi, who in the 1920's poured from his fervent soul the prayer that did so much to spark the Chinese Forward Movement of Evangelism: "Lord, revive Thy Church, beginning with me." It is this simple, direct, down-to-earth and personalized approach that I am proposing to you and myself.

I. "Revive The Faith Of Thy Church, Beginning With Me!"

It would do all of us a world of good to take this entire prayer of Daniel's and read it again and again. All of the way through it there runs a kindled and kindling faith. He was convinced that there was a listening God Who will do this thing, Who will answer this prayer, and Who will again clothe them with His honor and His glory. That was Daniel's faith.

There are great numbers of people in this country whose convictions about God, the family and the state are sound, and who wait only to be rallied. Their beliefs are sound, but the trouble is they are sound asleep. They must be rallied. Not faith asleep but faith astir is what gets results. The Christian faith of too many of us is like a lazy man in bed at ten in the morning with the covers pulled up around his neck. It needs to get on its feet. It needs to get going.

II. "Revive The Fellowship Of Thy Church, Beginning With Me!"

You will notice that Daniel began his prayer by saying, "I." Before he had prayed very long he said, "we." "We have sinned"; "We have committed iniquity"; "We have rebelled."

So deeply did he bewail his own sins and the iniquities of his people, that he strove by the most diversified expressions to make known his hatred of them. Here he distinctly acknowledges to God their transgression of His commandments, and their contempt of His reproofs. These were indeed a just ground for his humiliation; since to no other nation had such a revelation of God's will been given, or such messages of mercy sent. Happy was it for him, and happy for the nation, that the reason of their chastisements was thus discovered; and that, by knowing wherein they had erred, they had learned wherein they were to amend their conduct.

Confession of sin implies a recognition of guilt in our own consciousness and an admission of it in the presence of God. If we have sinned, it is wrong to ignore the fact until we have repented and been forgiven. To do so will foster insincerity and self-deception, and will harden the heart in sin. If we have sinned, we are required to declare our guilt before God. One test of sincerity of confession is the presence of real grief. There may be a bold admission of guilt without any feeling of compunction. Another test of sincerity in confession is the feeling of shame. There is a confession which glories in wickedness, but true confession is self-humiliating.

The important thing in the use of this "we" is Daniel's identification with his people. In the existing circumstances it was an identification of pain and penitence, which of course is precisely what is necessary when those who claim to be the people of God have forsaken His way for their own.

This closely knit community of understanding and sympathy was a feature of the early church that shines like a jewel in the setting of the Book of Acts. In one place Luke tells us "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

It is well to consider the meaning of fellowship. Too many of us think it is just a matter of being with people. Or we think it is the shallow comradeship that grows out of patting each other on the back. Or we think it is a group of people who in a social, or economic, or cultural way, are very much alike and congenial to each other. Some are so far off in their thinking that they call it fellowship if a company of people are brought together who have the same "gripes" and prejudices.

Real fellowship, in the New Testament definition of it, is what springs up when people begin actually to walk in the light together and to be open to one another and to Christ about their needs, their problems, their concerns and their longings.

III. "Revive The Fervor Of Thy Church, Beginning With Me!"

Look into Daniel's heart as he takes the lead in calling Judah to repentance and to a new realization of righteousness and honor before God. There is a flame in the young prophet's heart. "I set my face unto the Lord God," he tells us, "to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth and ashes."

We need a fire like that in our prayers. We need fire, too, in our witness for Christ. Some of you have been very excited over political campaigns. When you talked, there was some force in your voice and some animation in your spirit. The same could be said about your conversations on the World Series. Has there ever been anything like that spirit, that sparkle, that nerve in your conversations about Jesus Christ and His church and His glorious gospel which is the one last hope of this hour?

In a distant city there is a young woman who was reared in the church. One day she discovered that her Christianity was a profession without power, a respectful piece of sentiment about Christ without any vital experience of Christ. Then, one day that experience became hers, and it helped her through several rough spots in her own life. Still, she kept it pretty much to herself. The fire didn't go out but, on the other hand, it didn't flame out. One Sunday evening she attended a small meeting where some young people were talking about their faith, what it meant to them, how it worked in their lives, and how they might transmit it to others. It was all so warm and vital, yet so sane and wonderful, that she opened up and told what Christ meant to her. The result was a boldness about her faith that she had never known. The next week she took three girls as her responsibility, to talk to them about Christ and to point out to them how they might have a vital experience of Christ. Later her pastor wrote this about her: "The girl is intelligent, musical, interested in all things that make life worth while, loves to joke and laugh and have the right kind of fun. But she has become a spiritual sparkplug: and where she goes, things begin to happen spiritually."

Fellow Christians, God is calling us, as surely as He called Daniel, to stir ourselves. Daniel responded. He didn't have to do what he did. He could have gone on as casually and complacently as a lot of us have gone on for years. Instead we have this testimony: "I set my face unto the Lord God!"

Will you? A revival of faith, of fellowship and of fervor will come if we are ready to say, "beginning with me!"