

In God's Recovery Room

We are all presented with the same challenge. Every Christian on this planet is fair game in a sort of survival of the fittest game. The problem is that it is not a game. It is real life. The consequences of our actions are so serious that they determine how we will spend eternity.

A major part of the strategy of the enemy of our soul is to cause us to drift away from doing the things that we know are right to do. We can get discouraged with life. We can feel that we are all alone on this planet. Often times we harden our hearts and shut out the whispering voice of the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, the prophets of old cried out for Israel to turn to God and listen to His words instead of being enticed by the "pleasures of sin for a season."

There was a man named Hosea who was one of these prophets. He was tasked with calling the people of Israel back to God. At one point he cried out to them and said, "You are an empty vine." People in those days got it. Vineyards were a large part of their trade and survival. You could look like the healthiest vine possible but if your branches never bore fruit you would be useless.

For a few moments I am asking you and I to pause and consider our own lives. I am asking you to take an honest and engaged look at your spiritual life and condition today. It is from the book of Hosea that we read these words of admonition and encouragement. May God give us ears to hear these words and take the steps necessary to recover our spiritual health.

I said, 'Plant the good seeds of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the LORD, that He may come and shower righteousness upon you.' Hosea 10:12 NLT

Now this might look like it is something that you can do on your own but we could no more bring the reviving power of God to our lives than a farmer could be successful at growing a new crop without the cooperation of nature. It takes moisture to loosen the ground and replenish its soil. That comes from God.

Not one of us can hope to fix ourselves. Not one of us can leave a life of moral laxness and move to a life of moral purity without the powerful help of God who may look with compassion on us and deliver us from our own selfish ways. None of us can forgive our own sins. None of us can heal the wounds of our conscience.

We are instructed to seek the Lord so that, "*He may come and shower righteousness upon you.*"

Call it recovery or call it revival there will always be times when we need to experience this in our lives.

The Psalmist prayed for it in Psalm 85:6:

*Now restore us again, O God of our salvation. Put aside your anger against us once more.
5 Will you be angry with us always? Will you prolong your wrath to all generations? 6 Won't you
revive us again, so your people can rejoice in you? 7 Show us your unfailing love, O LORD, and
grant us your salvation. Psalm 85:4-7 NLT*

Again let me remind you that churches in America are in real trouble. We are long on consumerism and short active faith. We have our demands about church and shop for the latest and greatest church when in reality the world around us is hardly disturbed.

Our world is coming apart at the seams. The Middle East is threatening to explode in violence even beyond what is now happening. Russia has become once again an aggressive and undisciplined nation at the government level. Libya is burning. Our peace, safety and even American lifestyle is one catastrophe away from disaster and total chaos.

You see I could stand up here today and scare us all to death by posing one scenario after another. I could read you scriptures that would be even scarier than what I could dream up. The fact is that most of us were born in America and can't conceive of not having food, clean water to drink and stores with an abundance of everything to choose from whenever we need it. What would you do if life as you know it suddenly came to an end? All of the sudden things would get very real, including your faith.

I don't know what is going to happen tomorrow or even today but I do know that we should do everything possible to keep our faith intact and keep ourselves in a place that God is our source of support and strength.

How do we do that?

Our struggle is most often found in not following God's prescription for renewal and spiritual recovery. We are way too easy on ourselves. We hesitate and resist getting on our knees before a Holy God. We become unwilling to break up the hardness of our hearts and that is when we get into real trouble.

So here is God's plan for us to be able to recover lost ground in our spiritual lives.

1. Renewal and spiritual recovery is based on our response to God's call

God views us as intelligent and responsible beings. He asks us for our cooperation and obedience in carrying out His plans for our lives. When we do it His way we experience His grace and blessing. When we go our own way we have to deal with the consequences of our actions.

In this homely illustration from the world of farming and gardening, we can get right to the point. Without breaking up the ground you can't really plant the seeds and the soil won't really receive the rain. Without breaking up our hard hearts we can't be in a place where God's rain of righteousness can be received. God promises to send the rain into our lives but if we are not

ready for it we miss it. It runs off like water on hard ground. If you and I want to experience God's blessing there will be times when we have to do some hard work to receive it. Let me suggest a couple of things to think about.

a. Spiritual unconcern

William James, a well known Harvard Psychologists wrote years ago that there are some people for whom religion was like a "dull habit," while there are others for whom it is like an "acute fever." I guess it is the difference between luke-warmness and being on fire for God. Let's ask ourselves some questions today. Let's take a little examination.

When was the last time you were reading the Word of God and felt like praising God for what you read?

When was the last time the Holy Spirit led you out of your comfort zone to do something for God that you could never do in your own strength or gifts?

When is the last time you felt the thrill of going beyond giving your dimes and quarters to the work of Christ and laid out and extravagant offering to God that caused you to sacrifice somewhere in your life?

When have you felt the call of God to do something that will touch others with His message?

We have settled for a lifeless form of faith rooted in consumerism and made it all about what we get out of it. Our churches are filled with people looking for great music and a great message when that was never God's intent of what our faith was supposed to be about. Our faith is about living it out day by day in our daily lives. It is about being salt and light in an unsavory and dark world. The Christian life of a disciple is not about church but about the relationship you have with Jesus Christ on a daily basis.

Another area of hard ground that needs to be plowed is:

b. Sin unconfessed

"O Israel and Judah, what should I do with you?" asks the LORD. "For your love vanishes like the morning mist and disappears like dew in the sunlight. ⁵ I sent My prophets to cut you to pieces—to slaughter you with My words, with judgments as inescapable as light. ⁶ I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know Me more than I want burnt offerings. ⁷ But like Adam, you broke My covenant and betrayed My trust. Hosea 6:4-6 NLT

In chapters 7 and 8 God levels His charges specifically by accusing Israel of lying, of hypocrisy of compromise and practicing the lifestyle of the heathen around them. Chapter 9 closes lamenting the fact that Israel "will not listen or obey."

If you want God's blessing in your life you are going to have to be honest. Personal and corporate revival and renewal always start with confession. A great move of God took place many years ago at Wheaton College. It all started one day in chapel when a member of the track team asked to speak during the service and confessed that he had led the whole team to a meet on Sunday unknown to the administration and against the rules of the college. The President who was leading the service quietly asked if anyone else had any unconfessed sin and one after another students arose to unburden their hearts and openly declare their intentions to be right with God and man. Some confessed to cheating on their school work, some confessed unkind criticism of others, some were emotional and some were quiet but the chapel lasted for several hours that day. I wonder what we would be willing to say if given the chance to experience forgiveness and grace and the opportunity to be right with God?

God's way is plain. His words point us in the right direction. God said, "Let the wicked forsake his ways and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him and to our God for He will abundantly pardon."

2. Renewal and spiritual recovery require our reception to God's gift

He promises that if we will do the hard work of breaking up the hard ground of our hearts that He will rain righteousness into our lives. How does a plowed field receive the moisture that comes when it rains? It's really simple, it just takes it. We pray, we ponder, we search our hearts and lives and confess whatever is impeding our faith and God promises to give us the gift of spiritual recovery. The bottom line is that when we unclutter our hearts God comes into our souls. It's such a clear picture. It speaks of a couple of things:

a. Freeness

No one tries to buy the rain. You can't make it happen. It comes to us from our Creator. The gift of God's rain of righteousness is free. You can't earn it that's an insult.

In Romans we read: *For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.* Romans 5:17 NKJV

A homeless man was once given a check to help him buy some clothes and food. A few days later the man who gave the check spotted him on the street and he was in the same condition. He imagined that he spent the money on the wrong things but the man protested and produced the check. He said, "When I got to the bank I looked at my clothes and appearance and realized that those well-dressed people behind the counter would never give me the money." The business man reminded him that it wasn't his clothes or worthiness that decides the question but the name on the check!

God has put His name on this promise and He promises to heal us from our backslidings and purify the messes we create. His name is the promise. His blood shed on the cross backs it up.

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.
Ezekiel 36:25-27 NKJV

b. Fullness

There is also a fullness that comes. The prophet Isaiah reminds us of God's promise with these words, *"For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty and I will pour floods upon the dry ground."* Isaiah 44:3

Many years ago in India a rather large woman entered a religious shrine seeking relief from the turmoil that raged in her heart. She met a diminutive little woman who turned out to be a devout Christian who was there to try to testify about Christ. The woman listened in awe as the little lady told of the power of God to change things from within. But she argued, "You don't know me or my family. I have laid a curse on my family in a fit of anger. How can that ever be lifted and the tempest within me stilled? It won't work."

The Christian woman insisted that she try it. Try Jesus. The larger woman walked away shaking her head. Just one week later she was back searching frantically for the Christian lady that had pointed her to Christ. When she saw her she nearly knocked her over with exuberance. She put her long arms around her and shouted, "It works, it works! I tried it. Someone slapped me in the face today and I didn't even want to slap them back. Something inside of me has changed! It works."

If just a few of us could experience the falling rain of God's righteousness in our lives it would make all the difference in the world around us and in our church.

3. Renewal and spiritual recovery require our recognition of God's timing

"for now is the time to seek the LORD"

Now is the time. What holds you back? Personal renewal is not about some big religious moving that makes the news. It is not about running to Brownsville Florida or Toronto Canada as many have done in years past. It's about you and God. It's about realizing that He is always in the mood to rescue us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us. If we look to Him and are honest He will rescue us from our spiritual death.

Psalm 34

Philip Yancey shared this in his book, *Rumors of Another World*, pp.154-155:

Living in Colorado, I climb mountains. Colorado has 54 mountains rising above 14,000 feet and every summer I climb some of them. On a summer weekend in the mountains, I see casual hikers who have no idea what they are doing. In sandals, shorts, and T-shirts, carrying a single container of water, they start up a trail at mid-morning. They have no map, no compass, and no rain gear. They also have no apparent knowledge of the lightning storms that roll in many summer afternoons, making it imperative to summit before noon and head for the safety of the timberline (the elevation in a mountainous region above which trees do not grow).

My neighbor, who volunteers for Alpine Rescue, has told me hair-raising stories of tourists who must be rescued from certain death after wandering off a trail, falling, or simply being exposed to a sudden hailstorm or 30-degree drop in temperature. Nevertheless, regardless of the circumstances, Alpine Rescue always responds to a call for help. Not once have they lectured a hapless tourist, "Well, since you obviously ignored the most basic rules of the wilderness, you'll just have to sit here and bear the consequences. We won't assist you."

Their mission is rescue, and so they pursue every needy hiker in the wilderness, no matter how undeserving. A whistle, a cry, a flashing mirror, a bonfire, an "SOS spelled out in pine branches, a message of distress from a cellphone - any of these signals will cause Alpine Rescue to mobilize teams of medically trained searchers.

I have come to see the central message of the Bible, too, as one of rescue. In the book of Romans, Paul takes pains to point out that none of us 'deserve' God's mercy and none of us can save ourselves. Like a stranded hiker, all we can do is call for help.

A hardened park ranger could look at the efforts of Alpine Rescue as indulging the bad habits of irresponsible tourists. Shouldn't they spend their energy instead handing out rewards to hikers who follow the rules? ("God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers," prayed the Pharisees.)

When I posed such a question to my neighbor, she looked at me uncomprehending. "But our business is rescue!" she said. "Do you expect us to leave any hiker stranded in the wilderness? I don't care who they are - they need help." ("In the same way," said Jesus, "I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.")

And so I invite you today to come home. I invite you today to turn toward a God who will not reject you. He will heal the brokenhearted. He will lift you up. He will come and dwell in you.