

How History's Revivals Teach Us to Pray

The case for communing with God in a daring and agonizing way.

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From 1949 to 1952, the unthinkable unfolded on Scottish islands known as the Hebrides: revival! Seemingly out of nowhere, a spiritual awakening swept across the islands of Lewis and Harris, replacing post–World War II despair and depression with earnest, zealous faith. Some historians believe this was the last genuine awakening in the western world.

When I came across a book detailing the Hebridian Revival, I wanted to know how a community was transformed from spiritual freefall to stunning renewal. So I booked a flight to Scotland, hoping to meet anyone who might remember what happened in those days. To my amazement, I met 11 eyewitnesses—in their 80s now—who agreed to interviews in the sanctuary of the very church where the awakening began.

Bundled against the wintry barrenness outside, my new friends warmed with memories as tears flowed freely. While they admitted strong preaching and other measures had played a role in the revival, to a person they described something more essential when God moved: a kind of spiritual posture among those at the core of the awakening.

They told of the attitude of brokenness and desperation that stirred Christians in that day, a spirit of necessity and audacity, a manner of prayer that could be daring and agonizing. They called it “travailing prayer,” from how Paul described his prayers for the Galatians “of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you” (4:19 KJV).

Ever since I looked into the eyes of people who experienced the revival that we so desperately long to see again, I have come to believe that the link from here to there is in the hearts of men and women willing to receive this gift of travail.

Unfamiliar with casual prayer

Back home, a look through Scripture convinced me all the more. I read with new eyes how God had heard the groaning of the Hebrews (Ex. 2:23) and the heart-rending pleas of Hannah for a child (1 Sam. 1:15). I saw Isaiah’s resolve to “give [God] no rest” (Isa. 62:7) and Jeremiah’s

tenacity in clinging to God “as a belt clings to a person’s waist” (Jer. 13:8–11). There was the yearning of the psalmist for God to “listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need” (Ps. 142:6).

All this seemed to parallel how Jesus prayed, offering up “petitions with fervent cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7) over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44).

This same sort of prayer occurred among the disciples before Pentecost and in Paul’s entreaty for the Romans to “join me in my struggle”—literally, agonize with me—“by praying to God for me” (Rom 15:30). Was this, I wondered, something of what the New Testament meant by praying “in the Spirit” (Eph. 6:18), who “intercedes for us through wordless groans” (Rom. 8:26)?

I was confronted with how the Bible appears utterly unfamiliar with casual prayer, prayer of the mouth and not the heart. Travailing prayer—the kind of burdened, focused pressing my friends in the Hebrides described—seemed closer to the heart of prayer in Scripture.

A stream of this manner of praying flows from the early church all the way through the Reformation. Augustine called himself a son of his mother’s tears. Praying for the healing of his friend, Philip Melancthon, Martin Luther wrote, “I attacked [the Almighty] with his own weapons, quoting from Scripture all the promises I could remember, that prayers should be granted, and said that he must grant my prayer, if I was henceforth to put faith in his promises.”

But travailing prayer finally found a widespread voice at the dawn of the Great Awakenings in America, introduced primarily by Jonathan Edwards, colonial America’s greatest thinker.

Importunate and engaged

The epicenter of the First Great Awakening, Northampton, Massachusetts, was “full of the presence of God . . . in almost every house,” Edwards reported. He spotlights four-year-old Phebe Bartlet whose prayers sounded unusual when overheard by her mother, for “her voice seemed to be as of one exceeding importunate and engaged.”

This word *importunate* is uncommon today, but it captured for Edwards the insistent, repetitive nature of travailing prayer, like Jesus’ parables of a friend at midnight seeking bread from a neighbor (Luke 11:5–8) and a widow pursuing justice from an insolent judge (Luke 18:1–8).

Persistent prayer also drew Edwards to a young missionary named David Brainerd, who became something of an adopted son to Edwards and later died in their home at age 29. Days before his death, Brainerd gave Edwards his diary—a goldmine of travailing prayer that Edwards edited and published. In it, Edwards discovered an exemplary, no-nonsense chronicle of the kind of praying he believed awakening required. Brainerd’s prayers, Edwards commented, “seemed to flow from the fullness of his heart, as deeply impressed with a great and solemn sense of our necessities . . . and of God’s infinite greatness, excellency, and sufficiency, rather than merely from a warm and fruitful brain.”

Edwards observed that what distinguished authentic prayer from mere attempts to simulate these external “good expressions” was its source in the “spirit of grace and supplication” (Zech. 12:10). He believed this was “no other than God’s own Spirit dwelling in the hearts of the saints.”

Dependence on the Spirit, however, left no room for delay or inaction. Edwards exhorted Christians to take up the burden of prayer with urgency, for “hell is full of procrastinators and good intenders.”

Charles Finney, a key leader of the Second Great Awakening, understood this urgent prayer to be like discovering loved ones caught in a house fire. This was intercession that could seize us, compelling petitioners to pray in fervent agreement with God’s view of the need.

Finney recalled in his memoirs a friend so overcome by emotion while praying over a meal that he excused himself and was later found in bed groaning in prayer. Finney “took it for granted that the work would take on a powerful type,” and he records that, indeed, “it did so.”

Obviously, praying like this could affect a person’s reputation, which was no small thing for Finney himself. The breakthrough in his own conversion had come from facing his embarrassment over

having any “human being see me on my knees before God.” But when concern for others’ opinions lost its potency, Finney was daring in prayer even to the point of involving women as leaders of prayer meetings, a step considered fanatically controversial at that time. Boldness became Finney’s watchword as he admonished ministers to keep up a “constant argument with God for all that you need for the accomplishment of the work.”

The spirit of prayer

Such contending and wrestling, like Jacob for God’s blessing (Gen 32:22–32) or Epaphras for the Colossians (4:12–13), was a favorite image for Edwards and Finney of the prayer that sows for awakening. They believed it was not irreverent to be obstinate and grapple with God. Both understood how the Spirit sometimes broods over a church or community, as he did over chaos in creation, conceiving new life. But then it was the church’s role to pray that new life, those new births, into reality. They referred to the church as the “mother of the converted” as intercessors prayed in ways that could sound like a woman in childbirth.

The First and Second Great Awakenings overflowed with stories of an agony in prayer, of petitioners becoming unrelenting in their heart cries. They wrote of sweat, heaving, tears, and fasting. Finney emphasized praying until one had “prayed through” to assurance of having been heard, that it had been done in heaven and could be patiently expected on earth.

Most important to the leaders of awakenings was that none of this audacity and determination in prayer could be self-generated. An outpouring of the “spirit of prayer” was to them the key spiritual gift, the essential charism, of awakening: God himself, by his Spirit, providing the discernment and faith, the energy and language and very breath of awakening.

“Sometimes the conduct of the wicked drives Christians to prayer,” Finney wrote, “breaks them down, and makes them sorrowful and tender-hearted, so that they can weep day and night, and instead of scolding the wicked they pray earnestly for them. Then you may expect a revival. Indeed, it is begun already. ”

The Great Awakenings left far-reaching blessing in their wake. Six of the nine colonial colleges were the result of awakenings. A distinctive American theology formed from Edwards’s reflections. American churches multiplied four-fold during the Second Great Awakening. The American missionary movement expanded. And waves of social reforms—in prisons, against child labor, for women’s rights, against slavery—can be traced to our awakenings.

But Finney’s concern for his own children reminds us that travailing prayer is no formula or guarantee, as though we are somehow prying loose from God’s hand the thing we want. He prayed earnestly, even weeping publicly, for his own children to come to faith. Eventually they did—though not during his lifetime. The awakening we seek may be one we ourselves never see. Nonetheless, travailing prayer keeps sowing, even in tears, for all those who will one day reap with songs of joy.

The end of casual prayer

I must admit that all this has occasionally left me feeling guilty about my own praying. Who of us, if we’re honest, doesn’t deep down feel like we could be praying more, that we should in one way or another be praying better?

For most of my life, much of the North American church has suffered from a faulty self-perception that somehow believes all is right when it isn’t. So often we are like Esther with a whole nation wailing in desperation but, comfortable in our palace, we are unaware. Circumstances of ease or pride of place can foster isolation that detaches our prayers from holy love, which is ultimately what travailing prayer is: Gethsemane love. All sorts of factors like these can interfere with our being empathic and bold and tenacious in prayer.

We also may harbor a fear that nothing will come of our prayers. This underlying fear of being let down by God can paralyze us into defensive prayers meant mostly to protect us from

disappointment. Even Paul struggled with how God could still be working through prayer when it seemed to produce little more than delay and frustration (2 Cor. 12:7–9).

These factors are real roadblocks. But I've concluded that feeling guilty about them is a very short-lived and ultimately ineffective incentive for prayer. My encounter with travailing prayer moved me closer to what I believe God is looking for. As hope for awakening has deepened in me, my openness to praying for it less casually has grown in at least three ways.

1. Becoming more concerned and less concerned

How I pray matters to God. Just as I used to say to my young children "don't talk to me like that" when they were disrespectful, God could say the same about my prayers when I take lightly the condition of my relationships or the discernment behind my requests. Finney called on petitioners to seek to know how God sees the need before praying about it. I am learning that praying first about my prayer and seeking the Spirit's assistance to voice the desires of God are good ways to begin praying less casually.

Expecting such earnestness from everyone we pray with is unrealistic, however. Becoming less casual about prayer requires the humility of also becoming less concerned about what others may think. "I have no more concern for the reputation of Methodism, or my own, than for the reputation of Prester John," John Wesley once wrote. Awakening has always been ushered in by the petitions of the initially misunderstood, the obscure, and the burdened, who often weep while others relax.

2. Praying bigger and smaller

Another step has been to recognize how casual my prayers become when my request is actually attainable by human means. Believing that small vision hobbled the effectiveness of prayer, Edwards incited petitioners to "go and spread all their desires before God in their full extent, not to be afraid . . . but let their petitions be as large as their desires." When confronted with insurmountable difficulties of a broken world, the lessons of travail have challenged me to pray big. Travail is what prayer can feel and sound like when the intensity of our expression matches the vastness of our need.

Finney, however, worried that big prayers can also become broad, generic, and cliché: "God, please bless our community." "May our church follow your will, Lord." When Christians pray together, they should "come together with a definite object," Finney exhorted, "and let that object be sought in earnest prayer." I have found that particularity in prayer, for me, feels more risky, summoning greater faith. And when I have more at stake in the specific request, I ask less casually.

3. Taking on chosen desperation

Spiritual decline doesn't trigger days of fasting in me as it did among many in the colonial era. Fear of God's judgment of sin doesn't pierce our hearts as it did in antebellum America. We do not experience persecution as Christians do in parts of the world where tears are the church's prayer language. So if my prayer is to become non-casual, it will involve my own exertion of will to recognize our desperate need and to be gripped by it, an inner posture of spiritual honesty that defies my circumstances of ease.

Such keen awareness of current reality will fall short if I allow it only to make me appear insightful in conversation with others. What matters is that honest assessment of our times moves me to seek God for a share in his holy love for the world, voiced first not in a pulpit, blog, magazine article, or tweet, but in a closet. That's my choice to take as my own the most ancient and desperate prayer of the church: "Come, Holy Spirit."

Awakening would be too glorious, our need for it too great, and God is far too worthy to settle for anything less.

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