

## WARRING AGAINST IDOLS:: Gospel Awakening

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Throughout history we have seen outbreaks of Gospel awakenings. Of course this takes place everyday in the lives of individuals and small groups of people. However, by looking at major outbreaks we learn what defines a “Gospel Awakening.” The first Gospel Awakening happened in Acts 2 when the Apostle Peter was preaching his famous Pentecost Sermon. Peter used text from Joel and Psalms to preach Christ and the people listening “*were cut to the heart*” and begin to ask, “*Brothers, what shall we do?*” Peter replied, “*Repent.*” And about three thousand people came to Christ that day. The New Testament Church was birth with a tremendous Gospel Awakening.

In the 1740’s, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards were used to ignite the Great Awakenings that shook Europe and Colonial America. Whitefield’s biographer, Arnold A. Dallimore writes, “*He was led first to a new vision of the unapproachable heights of divine holiness, and then, in contrast, to a new sight of human sin: the darkness of sin as it appears in the sight of God, sin as it exists in fallen human nature, and above all sin as it dwelt within his own heart.*” But as God gave Whitefield to see something deeper of the nature of sin, even more did He give him to understand in a new and fuller measure the exceeding riches of His grace. In several letters he links the two experiences together, as in the following statement: *A sense of my actual sins and natural deformity humbled me exceedingly; and then the freeness and riches of God’s everlasting love broke in with such light and power upon my soul, that I was often awed into silence and could not speak!*” (p. 68).

Edwards spoke of “awakenings” because people who were blinded by sin needed to be awakened to their immense peril and God’s remedy for it in Christ. A true religious experience had to focus on God’s excellencies rather than oneself. The very essence of Christian experience was to have a truly affecting sense of the love and beauty of God, most fully revealed in Christ’s sacrifice. ([A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards](#), George M. Marsden p. 66 & 79).

A Gospel Awakening is when a person’s affections are gripped with the beauty of the holiness and love of God and the depravity of their own sin. Both are equally important. When one gets a glimpse of the holiness and love of God then and only then will one see how deeply sinful they truly are. Whenever we measure our righteousness in comparison to others instead of Christ we tend to have a truncated view of our own sinfulness. At a single glance at the cross one sees both the holiness and love of God and one’s sinfulness and brokenness. The cross shows us the only response a holy and righteous God can have toward sin, but it also shows us His amazing love in the sense that He poured out His wrath against our sin on His Son, Jesus Christ. The cross shows us how horrible our sin really is; not only in the horrific nature in which Christ was crucified but in the fact that the Father rejected Him so that we would be made acceptable before Him. He drank the cup of wrath that we rightly deserved so that we could drink of the cup of grace that we do not deserve. This single act should shock and astonish us. This should humble us with a deep sense of gratitude and security. We must live daily in full view of the cross.

*“All inadequate [teachings of the cross] are due to inadequate teachings of God and man. If we bring God down to our level and raise ourselves to his, then of course we see no need for a radical salvation, let alone for a radical [cross] to secure it. When, on the other hand, we have glimpsed the blinding glory of the holiness of God, and have been so convicted of our sin by the Holy Spirit that we tremble before God and acknowledge that we are, namely ‘hell-deserving sinners,’ then and only then does the necessity of the cross appear so obvious that we are astonished we never saw it before.”* – John Stott, [The Cross of Christ](#)

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones writes in his classic, [Studies in the Sermon on the Mount](#), that the church has become unattractive to men outside the church. He then gives a reason why, “*the final explanation of the state of the Church today is a defective sense of sin and defective doctrine of sin. Coupled with that, of course, is a failure to understand the true nature of Christian joy. There is a double failure. The defective doctrine of sin and the shallow idea of joy, working together, of necessity produce a superficial kind of person and a very inadequate kind of Christian life*” (p. 45).

### **On Beauty – [Psalm 8]**

Edwards biographer, George M. Marsden writes, “beauty” is the term that Edwards most typically used to describe the character of God’s ongoing actions in creation and redemption. “Beauty” for Edwards is not just an object of passive contemplation, but rather a transforming power. *If one sees a beautiful person, said Edwards, one cannot help but be drawn to that beauty. One’s heart is drawn to that beauty, and one’s actions will follow one’s heart.* So it is with the

professing of God as revealed in Christ. The most beautiful thing in all reality is for a perfectly good being to lovingly sacrifice Himself for rebellious, undeserving, and ungrateful creatures. In one glimpse the perfect beauty of such love, one cannot help but be drawn to it (p. 141).

Harvard professor Elaine Scarry in her little book, On Beauty and Being Just writes, “*Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger. Beauty, according to its critics, cause us to gape and suspend all thought.*” *We cannot do without beauty or avoid our pursuit of it...beauty is transforming to humans because it infuses hope through the conviction of meaning, and it gets us out of our self-absorption*” (p. 29). In other words, when we are in the presence of something beautiful, like the very character of God (His holiness and love) no matter what we believed or no matter what we were feeling before we gazed upon Him, we suddenly sense that there’s hope and meaning to everything happening around us. And that beauty has a way of lifting us out of our own self-centeredness.

All of the sudden, life is not about our own selfish desires, but it is about something greater, like praising this thing of beauty. We don’t gaze upon the Grand Canyon to raise our own self-esteem! Instead, looking out on the Grand Canyon has a way of turning our focus onto something bigger than ourselves. And gazing upon the beauty of God does the same thing in far greater ways.

The big problem is that we are far too easily satisfied. We were created to crave beauty, but in the fall of man we began to seek ultimate beauty in creation instead of our Creator. In Romans 1, Paul calls this reversal of purpose sin. Beauty is fully appreciated in creation when we see it pointing to its majestic Creator (as the Psalmist sings about in Psalms 8) instead of absorbing it into our soul’s craving lust for self-glorification. For example, sexual intimacy was created to remind us of the “profound mystery” of how Christ relates to His bride, the church. When we fail to see the true beauty of sex (or anything created) we begin to worship it as ultimate instead of its divine designer. Whenever we see the beauty of creation as ultimate it always leaves us empty. The Gospel awakens our souls to the true, eternal beauty of God.

Marsden writes, “*So the role of the evangelist is to convey the truth of God’s revelation so that sinners who are blinded to true beauty by their self-love may, through God’s grace, have their eyes opened to truly see it. If they do, their hearts will be changed and their lives will be dedicated to loving and serving others*” (p. 141).

*“Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it rest in Thee.” – St. Augustine*

*“There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” - Blaise Pascal*

*“The more abundantly the benefits of civilization come streaming our way, the emptier our life becomes. With all its wealth and power, it only shows that the human heart, in which God has put eternity (Ecc. 3.11), is so huge that all the world is too small to satisfy it.” - Herman Bavink, Reformed Dogmatics*

*“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” - C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory.*

Marsden goes on to write about Edwards view of God’s beauty, “*To have that experience one needed, “eyes to see” or “ears to hear,” as Scripture put it, or a sort of sixth sense. That transforming spiritual sense was itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. The difference between a mere knowledge about God’s love in Christ and a true spiritual experience of the beauty of that love was like the difference between knowing that honey was sweet and actually tasting the sweetness of honey. Sinful people were so preoccupied with their own pleasures that they never glimpsed God’s true love. Once their eyes were opened to see the beautiful and wondrous love of the perfect Christ’s sacrifice for undeserving sinners such as themselves, they would be drawn to that beauty that their hearts would be changed. Their most fundamental disposition would be to love God and whatever God loved” (p. 47). Their affections would no longer be stolen away by the idols of this world.*

## **On Sin**

*Here, then, is Jesus's radical redefinition of what is wrong with us. Nearly everyone defines sin as breaking a list of rules. Jesus, though, shows us that a man who has violated virtually nothing on the list of moral misbehaviors can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person. Why? Because sin is not just breaking the rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge.* – Tim Keller, [The Prodigal God](#), p. 43

Soren Kierkegaard defines sin as *“building your self worth on anything else but God.”* Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry.

We tend to minimize our sin or embark on self-salvation projects (see “In Full View of the Cross” essay).

When we truly come to grips with the true nature of our sin in the full beauty of God's holiness and love then and only then will we come to true repentance by God's grace. Chuck Colson writes after being exposed in the Nixon Watergate scandal, *“That night when I . . . sat alone in my car, my own sin—not just dirty politics, but the hatred and evil so deep within me—was thrust before my eyes, forcefully and painfully. For the first time in my life, I felt unclean, and worst of all, I could not escape. In those moments of clarity I found myself driven irresistibly into the arms of the living God”* (Chuck Colson, [Who Speaks for God?](#)).

## **On Repentance - The Gospel Applied**

Martin Luther ignited The Protestant Reformation (in 1517) when he nailed the “The Ninety-Five Theses” do the door of the Wittenburg Cathedral. In the first thesis, Luther writes, *“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [Matthew 4.17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”*

### **Gospel Rhythms of Repentance [Matthew 5.1-12]**

#### **a. The Condition**

*Spiritual Poverty* - Poverty in spirit is the awareness and admission that we are utterly sinful and without the moral virtues adequate to commend us to God (R. Kent Hughes).

*The shallowness of many people who are “saved” may be due to the fact that they have never known themselves to be lost.* – Richard Lovelace, [Renewal As a Way of Life](#) p. 21

#### **b. The Response**

*Mourning* - The only response to seeing our spiritual bankruptcy. A godly grief that results in repentance that leads to salvation (2 Corinthians 7.10).

*“Thus we learn that we only make due progress in the knowledge of the Word of the Lord when we become really humbled and groan under the burden of our sins and learn to flee God's mercy and find rest in nothing except His father's favor.”* – John Calvin, [The Crossway Classic Commentaries](#) p. 25

*“It is important to be fully persuaded that when we have sinned, there is a reconciliation with God ready and prepared for us; otherwise we shall always be carrying hell within us. Indeed, few people consider how miserable and wretched a doubting conscience is; but the truth is that hell reigns where there is no peace with God.”* – John Calvin, [The Crossway Classic Commentaries](#) p. 23

#### **c. The Result**

*Meekness* – is being freed from self in its every shape and form—self concern, pride, boasting, self-protection, sensitive, always imagining people are against him, a desire to protect self and glorify self (Martin Lloyd Jones).

#### **d. The Pursuit**

*Righteousness* – the longing to be free from the power and desire of sin. One's supreme desire in life is to know God and be in fellowship with Him.

#### **e. The Life – Mercy, Purity, Peace and Persecution**

## **f. The Reward – The King & the Kingdom**

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 7.10, *“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”*

In a January 9, 1738, letter to a friend, George Whitefield laid out an order for regular repentance. He wrote: *“God give me a deep humility and a burning love, a well-guided zeal and a single eye, and then let men and devils do their worst!”*

In Psalm 130.4 we read the remarkable verse: *“but with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.”* This is one of the most striking verses in the Bible. The Psalmist says that forgiveness, pardon, and grace leads to an increase in the “fear” of the Lord. What does this mean? *“Serve fear [being scared] would have been diminished, not increased, by forgiveness...The true sense of the ‘fear of the Lord’ in the Old Testament... implies relationship.”* (DK, p.446) So this term “fear” would be best defined as: “joyful awe and wonder before the transcendent greatness of who God is”. And here in Psalm 130, it is the prospect of grace and mercy that leads the author into joyful and humble submission.

This “fear” then is paradoxical. The more we experience grace and forgiveness and love, the more we get out of ourselves, the more we bow to Him in amazed, wondering submission to the greatness and beauty of his holiness and love. When we *really* understand that we are forgiven, it does not lead to ‘loose living’ or independence, but to respectful surrender to his sovereignty. If we had earned our salvation, our lives would still be our own! He’d owe us something. But since our salvation is by free grace, due totally to His love, then there is nothing he cannot ask of us. We are not our own. It is the joy that brings about this submission.

### **Captivated by the Cross**

To live a life captivated by the cross, we must constantly nourish our minds with biblical truth. We need to know and see and savor the holy, righteous character of God. And we need to identify and admit and feel the depth of our brokenness and sinfulness. We don’t need to do these things because “that’s what Christians are supposed to do.” Rather, we make this our aim because it is the life Christ wants for us – a life marked by meekness, a deep hunger and thirst for righteousness, mercy, purity and peace.

The cross, then, is an expression of God’s wrath toward sin as well as His love for us. It expresses His holiness in His determination to punish sin, even at the cost of His Son. And expresses His love in sending His Son to bear the punishment we so justly deserved. So in answer to the question, “Why the cross?” *We must say God’s holiness demanded it to save us from our sins. We cannot begin to understand the true significance of the cross unless we understand something of the holiness of God and the depth of our sin. And it is a continuing sense of the imperfection of our obedience, arising from the constant presence and remaining power of indwelling sin, that drives us more and more as believers to an absolute dependence on the grace of God given to us through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.* – Jerry Bridges, The Gospel For Real Life p. 29-30.

*As we consider the work of Christ for us, we need to keep in mind our sin that necessitated it. For it is only against the dark backdrop of our sinfulness that we can see the glory of the cross shining forth in all its brilliance and splendor. And, as we gaze upon the glory of the cross, we will also discover that Christ, in His great work for us, not only resolved our sin problem, but also secured for us [the unsearchable riches of Christ].* – Jerry Bridges, The Gospel For Real Life p. 30.

A Gospel Awakening means seeing more of God’s holiness and more of my sin. And because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we need not fear seeing God as he really is or admitting how broken we really are. Our hope is not in our own goodness, nor in the vain expectation that God will compromise His standards and “grade on a curve.” Rather, we rest in Jesus as our perfect Redeemer – the one who is “our righteousness, holiness, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1.30).

In Galatians 6.14, Paul gives us a fascinating glimpse into how his faith in the Gospel transformed him when he writes, *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”* John Stott writes, *“Paul’s whole world was in orbit around the cross. It filled his vision, illumined his life, warmed his spirit. He “gloried” in it. It meant more to him than anything else. . . This Greek word translated here as “boast” has no exact equivalent in English. It means to glory in, trust in, revel in, live for. In a word, our glory is our obsession.”* This is what it means to live daily in full view of the cross. May your soul experience a deep Gospel Awakening.