

A Good Old-Fashioned Revival

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When I began writing about my family in 2010, I had no idea what I was doing. A newly minted adult, out on my own for the first time, I used genealogy as a hobby to pass my free time as a single gal. I'd moved to a town where I knew no one. I had little money to spend on frivolous pursuits, so hanging out at libraries and courthouses was cheap entertainment. Something I could do by myself until friendships were formed and life became busy.

Writing about one's ancestors is a joy and a challenge. Trying to bring life to people you never knew and heard nothing about is a task better left to the professionals. Even so, I trudge onward, learning about my past to help me understand how I came to be where I am and who I am.

For those ancestors, crossing the Appalachian Mountains surely seemed an insurmountable challenge as they walked on foot from North Carolina to cross through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. Passage along the Ohio, Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers were perhaps terrifying for those who could not swim.

Dangers lurked all about. From bears and bobcats to rattle snakes and copperheads; their frontier days were perilous. The pioneers were a hearty bunch, rooted in their Christian faith. Their lives followed the rhythm of nature and their beliefs were taught to their children. These "ways" were developed several hundreds of years before my people came to Kentucky.

Retelling our beliefs and teaching our faith to our children has been our family's heritage for generations upon generations. Not only did my family talk about their faith orally, they showed their commitment to it by the way they lived. In this 21st century, I have a growing concern that this faith tradition of loving God and our neighbor as ourselves, is fading. Not just in Kentucky but across our nation and the world.

To explain, I reference the daily news. Read or listen to the vitriolic way people speak to and treat one another. It seems everyone is angry about something. Given the frustrations brought about by COVID-19, it's understandable that people are ready to go back to some kind of normal. Yet, the pandemic seems to worsen rather than improve while our exasperation grows more verbal and increasingly physical.

I find solace and instruction on how to move forward by returning to the words of my faith – the "ways" I was taught by my ancestors. We find an eerily similar story to our situation today in the book of Nehemiah.

When the Israelite people, God's chosen family, behaved like mischievous children, refusing to listen and forgetting all the ways God took care of them on their journey to the promised land,

there was punishment. The very people God loved the most became stiff-necked and arrogantly disobeyed God.

But God was forgiving, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and filled with incredible love. He didn't abandon them, even when they erected the golden calf and committed wicked acts against Him. God denied them entry into the promised land for forty years, yet they wanted for nothing. They had food and drink, their clothes never wore out and their feet were never swollen. Their children were as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Once the elders died out, God subdued the Canaanites and finally admitted the children into the promised land. As their lives unfolded and their homes were filled with good things, they forgot all about God. They did not tell the stories of their ancestors and how God saved them from slavery. The lives they led did not show their descendants how to worship or teach others to thank God for His mercies and blessings.

The people refused to listen, trusting only in their own abilities, rebelling against God. They were so vile and evil they killed the prophets who tried to remind them of how God had brought them out of Egypt. In punishment, God delivered the people to their enemies.

Over and over, this pattern of behavior continued. God would rescue His people and life would go well. When they turned away, he'd warn them through their prophets to return to the law. But people were people and they fell out of relationship with God. Because of their sins, their abundant harvests went to the kings God placed over them.

A turning point came when Nehemiah, a cup-bearer for the king, was visited by his brother. He learned that the children of Israel were in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem had been broken and its gates had been burned with fire. Nehemiah was deeply troubled by this message; he mourned, fasted and prayed for days.

Nehemiah remembered the instructions from Moses that if the people were unfaithful, God would scatter them among the nations. But if the people returned to God and obeyed His commands, then God would gather them and bring them to the place He had chosen for them. In his prayers, Nehemiah begged God to forgive His ancestors. He confessed the sins he, his family, and all the Israelite people had committed against God. He prayed for God to deliver him and he went before the king to ask permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall.

With the king's permission, Nehemiah went to the land of his ancestors to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. After reviewing the sad state of the situation, he called upon the Jews to help him rebuild, sharing with them that he had found favor with God. The others, non-believers, mocked and ridiculed him, but Nehemiah knew God was on his side. Very soon, the walls of Jerusalem were underway.

Nehemiah then called upon his people to stand apart from others who did not worship their God. Nehemiah recited the history of his ancestors' escape from Egypt and all the times God

rescued them because of His great love and compassion. The Israelites were so moved by what they heard, they stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.

They spent part of the day reading Gods word, then another part of the day worshipping God, and the third part of the day confessing their sins.

The last quarter of the day, the people were so moved by this act of thanksgiving and atonement, they agreed to sign a binding agreement that they would keep the laws of God. The people were determined to prove the sincerity of their prayer and they wanted to take decisive action. They solemnly promised to walk in God's law, and pledged, "We will not neglect the house of our God" (Nehemiah 10:39).

It was a moment of spiritual revival among the people and their God.

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When I was a little girl, churches often held revivals, especially during the summer. These special events were typically led by a preacher from another community. These revivals were filled with music, prayers and a spirit-filled sermon. It was the perfect time for Christians to renew their personal relationship with God.

I believe those of us today that believe in Jesus as our Savior, have never had a better need in our collective lives for a good old-fashioned spirit-filled revival. The first step is to recall the words of God. We need to read them and imprint them on our hearts and in our minds.

The second part of a personal revival is to confess our sin and worship God. We must humble ourselves before our loving God who rescues us every single time we acknowledge His holiness.

And, like Nehemiah and his brethren, we need to seal our promise with action. The way we treat people, the way we act and speak, our very lives should be our pledge to God that we will not neglect our relationship with God.

Today, I pray God's forgiveness of me, my family and our ancestors for all the times I and we have failed him. I thank God for blessing us with His laws and teachings. I ask for the Holy Spirit to move us as a nation toward a spiritual revival that only He can achieve.

It is time for a spiritual revival among the people and our God.

Amen.

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For more of Bobbie's essays, visit her website at bobbiesmithbryant.com