

George Whitefield was born on December 16, 1714, in Gloucester, England - the youngest of seven children. His father died when George was two and as his widowed mother Elizabeth struggled to provide for her family George ultimately left school to work in the inn. However, sitting up late at night, George became a diligent student of the Bible. And so he returned to grammar school and in 1732 at age 17, George entered Pembroke College at Oxford where he was gradually drawn into a group called the "Holy Club" where he met John and Charles Wesley. Charles Wesley loaned him the book, “The Life of God in the Soul of Man” by Henry Scougal. The reading of this book, along with a long and painful physical struggle, finally resulted in George giving his heart and life to Jesus in 1735.

Forced to leave school because of poor health, George returned home for nine months of recuperation. It was during that time that was ordained Whitefield as a deacon. He ultimately finished his degree at Oxford and was ordained by the Church of England. He then returned to Gloucester and preached twice each Sunday, and thousands began to flock to hear him. His sermons were fresh and deep and passionate - full of God and full of spiritual joy. People who heard said his sermons said they were like a bolt of lightning to the heart. Strangely enough as his preaching became popular, the Church of England began to persecute him as an "enthusiast." The Church of England only approved of sermons that were short, quiet and reserved. But Whitefield was none of these - and so he was banned from preaching in the Church of England churches. And so he preached in other churches and he began to preach out-of-doors where thousands of coal miners would stand for hours on end listening to his sermons. The presence of God was so thick that nothing could be heard but Whitefield’s voice and the crying of those who were convicted by God. Whitefield spoke of looking out at nothing but faces completely black with coal dust except for the tearful white streaks running down their checks.

Whitefield preached to crowds of thousands and to millions of people all over England. In August 1739 he ultimately set sail for North America where he, along with Jonathan Edwards, became a spark that helped ignite the revival of First Great Awakening that swept across the country when hundreds of thousands came to faith in Jesus Christ. Whitefield preached more than 18,000 sermons in his lifetime, an average of 500 a year or ten a week during which millions were converted. George Whitefield died in 1770 in Newburysport, Massachusetts; he is buried underneath the pulpit of his church there. In January of 2005 while doing some field work on my doctorate degree, I had the privilege of preaching from that pulpit. Not long after Christ came into my life I learned about who George Whitefield was, and ever since I have considered him – along with John Newton – to be the men of God who have mentored me from the grave. It was because of the influence of George Whitefield that I ultimately pursued the doctorate degree I have now, which is *Revival and Reform: Renewing Congregational Life*.

To “*revive*” something means to bring it back to life; the implication being that there was life there at one time. *Revival* for the born again Christian means that the spirit of Christ that lives within us, that has been asleep and dormant – suddenly and powerfully wakes up and passionately embraces attitudes and joyfully engages in activities that are God-centered and focused on sharing and glorifying Jesus. *Revival* is an awakening of God’s people, which causes them to become passionately proactive for God.

Nancy and I followed God’s call to Arrowsmith because we believed God was going to do something special here. God is doing some great things here at Arrowsmith. Now that doesn’t take away from the great things God has done here in the past. But we don’t live in the past, we live in today. And as we take stock of today - the times we live in, the world we live in – there is no doubt it’s time for us to ask God for much, much more of Himself. I’ve been your Senior Pastor for almost three years and I want more of God. I have experienced revival and I want more of God. I want more of God for me and for you. I want more of God for my family, for this community, and for the world we live in. We need more of God because terrorism, war, economic uncertainty, trouble, evil and death are all around and in us.

The philosophy of our age is moral relativism and tolerance of immorality; our culture no longer believes there is an absolute truth or an absolute right or wrong. We live in a day where cynicism is rampant; everyone and everything is viewed through a critical lens. We see this in that both Canada and the United States are more sharply divided along political lines than ever before in history. Rebellion against authority not only abound in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in the hearts and minds of many in North America - and many of those claim to be Christians. The Bible tells us that we are to be the salt and the light of the world, yet our lives are often no different from that of the world. Studies show out of 66 different lifestyle categories Christians are no different in any area than those who are lost. Yesterday the "Restoring Honor" rally in Washington DC, Glen Beck told the 100,000 people who stood before the Washington Monument that America needs to "turn back to God." He said: "for too long, this country has wandered in darkness." People look at those who claim today - in the United States and in Canada - and wonder if Jesus really makes any difference.

The context in which our text is found today occurs in such a day as ours. God's people lived in the midst of seemingly good and prosperous day under the rule of King Solomon. But judgment was just around the corner. Though wise in his decisions to rule, Solomon's heart towards God had been numbed by prosperity and dulled by comfort, and God's people suffered from the very same thing. As a result we read a mere two chapters later that God gave His people over to their sin, resulting in anger and bitterness and self-centeredness and division and violence and war and death. Sound familiar?

Our text this morning opens on a memorable day in the history of the children of Israel - the day on which the temple built by Solomon was being dedicated to the Lord. It would be a day that would not be forgotten by those who were privileged to be present - the presence of God was deep and heavy and powerful as God revealed Himself in an overwhelming manifestation of His glory: *"As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever'"* (2 Chronicles 7:1-3).

Reading on we see that the enthusiasm of the people at that very moment knew no bounds - as they worshipped God in receiving the blessing of His presence in the temple they passionately surrendered their sacrifices to God, dedicating themselves to God. But we also read that God knows the fickleness of the human heart, and so on this day of national rejoicing, when the people were unrestrained in their passion and zeal for God as they proclaimed their commitment to Him God came to Solomon and said:

*"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place."* 2 Chronicles 7:12-15

God is promising to Solomon that if He brings His judgment on the nation of Israel by way of drought or locusts or pestilence for their sin of rebellion or apathy or arrogance or idolatry, they need only turn back to the Lord in earnest repentance and He would forgive and restore them to Himself. But God also warned there would be consequences if they did not: *"But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments that I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from my land that I have given you, and this house that I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight, and I will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples"* (2 Chronicles 7:19-20).

In His sovereignty God knew the hearts of His people; providentially He foresaw the spiritual decline they would embrace, a decline which ultimately would bring His judgment on them and their land. This promise was made to those whom God describes as "*my people*", that is, Israel. Israel had been chosen by God to be a nation that would be distinct from all other nations and, as such they could be heir to all of His promises. In like manner, in these days in which we live, God has called and chosen His church, His people, to be distinct from the world, to receive His promises. We may choose to follow many paths to promises in this life, but there is only one true path that leads to God's heart. In today's text God is calling us, choosing us, through His inspired Word, to return to Him, to follow His path to His promises. *God's Word this morning outlines four steps that put us on the path back to God's heart.*

1) The first step that leads to God's heart is humility. "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves." Pride is one of the most common of human failings and yet it is the most deadly of all sins. Pride, in fact, is the root of all sin. In today's relativistic culture sin has been so minimized that pride is now being defined as "confidence in one's own ability." But whatever you want to call it, pride is still that ugly thing which causes a puny man to shake his fist in the face of Almighty God, and say: "I am in charge of my life, my money, my choices and my decisions. I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul!" But the day when we will truly stand in the glorious presence of God, our hearts and souls *will be humbled* - and our prideful attitudes will retreat into the background of lost defeat, as we will then acknowledge the truth that "confidence in our own ability" is a nothing more than sin.

Humility that comes from God's presence allows sin to be seen in its true colors; when we see sin for what it really is - we are then not able to explain it away in such terms as an error of judgment or a mistake. In God's presence sin is recognized for what it really is - *an act of rebellion*. And in the presence of God we will see that we sin against no one except God Himself - as in the humble words of King David spoken to God in Psalm 51:4: "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.*"

Winston Churchill was once asked, "Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?" "It's quite flattering," replied Sir Winston. "But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big." Martin De Haan used to say, "Humility is something we should constantly pray for, yet never thank God that we have." Because we are sinners it's so easy to be proud of our humility.

In remembering that man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever - the humble see their own efforts as weak and insufficient to fulfill those ends. A man once said, "I don't believe I shall be afraid to meet my Maker, for I am resting on the finished work of Christ. But when I think of how little I have truly lived for Jesus, I believe I shall be ashamed to look Him in the face" Those who have learned the secret of humility possess such an attitude - for out of an acknowledgement of sin there also comes a deep sense of desperate need. Once our eyes are opened by the grace and mercy of God we then become conscious not only of our sin and failure but also of our total, desperate need for Jesus.

2) The first step towards God's heart is humility. The second step is: *prayer*. "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray." Humbled in the presence of God, by a sense of our own unworthiness - the grace and mercy of God become the center point of our lives as we face the struggles and trials and temptations and sufferings of everyday life. Our own efforts are futile to justify us before God; our own efforts are ineffective as we seek to live our lives for God. And so in our lost desperate state, we seek God's help through the relationship of prayer. Humility conditions our hearts and minds for the exercise of prayer. Prayer is the second step on the road that leads to the heart of God.

After Saul of Tarsus met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, the Lord told a man named Ananias to “*rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying*” (Acts 9:11). Praying to God wasn’t something new for Saul, as a Pharisee he was well accustomed to the regular routine and traditions of prayer. But after he met Jesus, his prayers were no longer a mere formality but a powerful reality. He had met Jesus face to face and his prayers were an expression of a humbled heart that said: “Lord, not my will but Yours.”

Sadly it often takes tragic or dramatic events to shake us out of our numbness to God, so that we might recapture the spirit of true prayer. The well-known Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon described the church’s weekly prayer meeting as “the heating apparatus (furnace) of the Church.” When the embers of the fire of God are burning so low that they fail to bring passion and commitment to God’s people, the church often turns to the means of programs and entertainment to excite the emotions and fill the pews. But that’s not how God works, for He said: “*If my people, who are called by My name . . . pray . . . then I will.*” Pastor Jim Cymbala has said that “You can tell how popular a church is by how many attend of Sunday morning. You can tell how popular a pastor is by how many attend Bible studies. But you can tell how popular Jesus is by how many attend your church’s prayer meetings.”

3) The first two steps into God’s heart are humility and prayer. The third step is seeking God’s face. “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face.” Seeking God’s face is earnestness, a sold-out passion to deepen your relationship with God. *Notice we are to seek His face, not His hands.* Much too often we seek God’s hands of provision or hands of healing or hands of blessing. But revival will come to the church when the hearts of God’s people are bent to a much greater degree towards those things that are spiritual - rather than those things that are physical and material.

In everyday life “*seeking God’s face*” has to do with priorities. The Lord Himself has provided us with a priority list. Jesus said: “*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*” (Matthew 6:33). The problem of today is that many who profess Christ are so deeply concerned with things of secondary importance - that they have little or no time left to seek God’s face. Our lives are way too busy with the priorities of this world which ultimately will turn to dust. Is it not time for all of us to take stock of our priorities and give the Lord his rightful place in our hearts and in our lives? Brothers and sisters, let us heed the words of the prophet Hosea, who said: “*Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you*” (Hosea 10:12). Fallow, broken hearts that seek God will receive his rain (reign).

4) The first three steps towards God’s heart are humility, prayer and seeking God’s face. The fourth and final step is: turning from our wicked ways. “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways.” It is surprising that a people who had been chosen by God, and who had stood in God’s presence, were so ready and eager to turn their backs on God. Yet the Israelites were all too prone to follow the pagan nations that lived around them. And not only did they follow them, they also engaged in the pagan practice of idolatry. Historically we know that time and time again Israel forsook the living God and worshipped the gods of this world. Such is what greeted Moses when he came down from the mountain and found the people of God, for whom God had delivered out of slavery to this world, bowing down and worshipping a golden calf.

Unfortunately the practice of idolatry has not ceased with the passing of the years. We no longer worship golden calves, but we do worship the idols of our day to such a degree that it does most often dethrone King Jesus. We live in world and culture where value is attached to *what we have* or *what we do* rather than *who we are in Christ*. How many who claim Christ are like the rich young ruler, who make their wealth their God? How many us who claim Christ bow to the idol of popularity, the idol of recreation and leisure, the idol of success, the idol of security, the idol of relationships - the idols of being right or being heard or being respected or being happy or being needed or being comfortable?

“Turning from our wicked ways” is another way of defining repentance. To “repent” means to turn from going away from God and turn and go back to God. When we repent we confess we are wrong and that we have deliberately strayed from God’s will for our lives and followed our own will for our lives. You see it is one thing *to know* the will of God; it’s another thing *to do* the will of God. Turning from our “wicked ways” is where the rubber meets the road in our faith. Those who have been humbled by God will turn away from their own ways and head towards the ways of God. Proverbs 28:13 says: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” There are “transgressions” in our lives because we are sinners. If we are to receive God’s mercy, we must confess and forsake, we must turn away from our will and seek God’s will. *We need to turn away* from our neglect of God’s Word. *We need to turn away* from our making the Lord’s Day a holiday rather than a holy day. *We need to turn away* from living our lives without Christ at the very center. *We need to turn away* from anger and bitterness and criticism and self-righteousness. *We need to turn away* from our indifference to lost souls. *We need to turn away* from worldliness. We need to turn away from watering-down sin and rationalizing our sin – because when the Bible calls something sin, then it’s sin whether we like it or not. *We must turn away* from those things that are not of God.

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” Humility. Prayer. Seek God’s face. Turn from our wicked ways. God is telling us this morning that these are the four steps that put us on the path that leads to God’s heart. God also tells us in our text for today that when we do take those humble, prayerful, God centered, repentant steps *He promises two things will happen.*

God first promises that He will grant us the personal blessing of His mercy and His grace: “I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin.” God’s mercy is God *not giving* us what *we do deserve*; as sinners by our fallen nature who continue to think, speak and act against God – we are deserving of God’s wrath, condemnation and punishment. Romans 3:23 tells us that we “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” and Romans 6:23 says that “*the wages of sin is death.*” And the punishment of death is not just physical, it is also spiritual. In 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 we read that “*those who do not know God and . . . those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus . . . will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.*” These are New Testament words that reflect the Old Testament warning we read in our text for today when God said: “*But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments that I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from my land . . . I will cast out of my sight*” (2 Chronicles 7:19-20).

I know it is not popular today to speak about the reality of hell, but hell is real. And if you claim to know Jesus, you had better be humbly following Jesus and obediently do what Jesus demands if you expect to go to heaven. Jesus clearly states this in John 3:36: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*” Were it not for the mercy of God’s forgiveness through the cross of Jesus Christ we all would fully know the wrath of God and hell would be our eternal home. But for sinners who humbly, prayerfully, seek God’s face and turn from their sin and turn to God - there is the abundant grace of forgiveness and pardon and hope given by God for those who surrender their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

While God’s *mercy* is God *not giving* us what *we do deserve*, God’s *grace* is God *giving us* what *we do not deserve*. We do not deserve forgiveness; as sinners by our fallen nature we do continue to think, speak and act against God – and we are powerless to make things right, to pay the wages of sin. That’s what Jesus did for us. In Colossians 2:13-14 we read that “*you, who were dead in your trespasses . . . God made alive . . . having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*” In Romans 6:23 it says: “*For the wages of sin is death . . . but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” By God’s mercy (not giving us what we do deserve) and God’s grace (giving us what we do not deserve) He promises to forgive us.

But there is also a second promise: "I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." This is God's promise of a *corporate blessing of His mercy and His grace*. In the preceding verse God warned Israel of the consequences of sin would be drought: "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain" (2 Chronicles 7:13). Israel's very existence depended on rain for without rain there would be famine in the land. During the rule of Ahab the land experienced a terrible drought and famine; only after Elijah walked off the steps for the nation of Israel leading to the path of God's heart that the rain came and the famine was brought to an end - and the land healed. Is that not the same healing power we need in North America, in Canada, in our community, in our families, in our church today? We live in times of *spiritual drought and famine*; we urgently need the life giving rain of God to shower down and refresh and renew and revive the Spirit of God within us and around us. Only a fresh pouring out of God's Spirit can revive the parched ground of the hearts of God's people. We must not presume on the blessing of God's mercy and God's grace, on His forgiveness and healing. While the Bible calls us saints, it also calls us sinners. While we do live in a free country - but if we were truly honest, we would confess our imprisonment to our expectations, to our comfortable lifestyles, and to our spiritual apathy.

In the early morning dim of March 29, 1849 a sympathetic storekeeper in Richmond, Virginia nailed the lid on a crate containing a slave. A two-hundred pound man had folded himself into a wooden box just three-foot-one-inch long, two feet wide, and two-and-half feet deep. Cramped in suffocating darkness, the slave endured - often upside down - a grueling three-hundred-and-fifty mile shipment via railroad freight car, steamboat, and wagon. Twenty-seven hours later in an office in Philadelphia Henry Brown emerged from his coffin-like confinement to begin a new life as a free man. The news of his stunning appearance encouraged and empowered the hopes of freedom for countless slaves across the country.

Jesus has risen from the dead! This is stunning news that should encourage and empower us to deeply love him and fully live for him. Romans 6:7-11 tells us: "*For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*" In John 8:36 Jesus said: "*So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*"

We were not created by God to live in the small boxes of life we have created for ourselves. We were created for something much greater; in Isaiah 43:7 God Himself said "*everyone who is called by my name, whom I formed and made . . . I created for my glory!*" You and I have been created for the glory of God! And yet because we continue to sin, we fall short of that glory. But God promised that if we humble ourselves and pray and seek His face and turn from our wicked ways - He will hear from heaven and will forgive our sins and heal our land. Do you want that brothers and sisters? God has set the steps before us; when we take those steps God will surely honor His promise.

God has more to give us than we have ever had before; with God there is always more. There is more if we humble ourselves; more if we pray; more if we seek His face; more if we turn from our wicked ways. The Welsh author Howard Spring once said: "The kingdom of God is not going to advance by our churches becoming filled with men, but by men in our churches becoming filled with God." If we want the more of God, we need to give Him more of ourselves. If we want God to move in our lives, we must move towards Him. James 4:8 says: "*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*" We can draw near - this morning God has put the steps towards His heart before us. In the words of Lamentations 3:40-41: "*Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven!*" May God's words from our text be true for us today when He said: "*Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place.*" In the words that George Whitefield used so often be our prayer for today: "May God enlarge our hearts!" Amen?