

Getting Out of a Religious Rut – Part 1

Isaiah 1:10-19

Has your car ever got stuck in the mud? Perhaps you have seen this happen to someone, or watched it on TV. When a car gets stuck, the more it tries to get out, the deeper it seems to get stuck. The tyres spin furiously, but instead of finding traction the car just digs in deeper. The car is in a rut. It is stuck, and the more it keeps doing what it is doing, the deeper the rut.

I believe the same thing happens to many Christians, and to entire churches. They find themselves in a religious rut. And, like an inexperienced driver just pressing the accelerator, they keep on doing what they are doing, and they find they are in a deeper rut than ever before.

Tozer described the process as rote, rut and rot.

Rote is what happens with many of us. Because the Christian life has various facets which we are to do regularly and consistently, we can find ourselves in a pattern of repetition without feeling. That is, we come to church, we stand up to sing, we sing, we sit down, we close our eyes in a prayer, we stand up again, we sing, we sit down, we put something into the offering, we listen to a message, we shake some hands afterwards and we go home. But it is a repetition without feeling. We are going through the motions.

We read our Bible every day, or most days, and we agree with what we read, at least mentally; but it seems almost like reading something meant for someone else – like eavesdropping on someone else’s conversation. It does not move us, affect us, grip us, thrill us, transform us. We do it by rote – repetition without feeling.

The same might be said for our conduct. We have a certain way of speaking to people, of speaking about people, of working, of driving, of relaxing, of relating to our families. But it is simply a repetition of what we have almost always done. It is by rote, it is a repetition without feeling – without directing the acts to God or depending on God.

This is what Israel was doing. All their rituals were fully functioning. New moons, incense, prayers, sacrifices, Sabbaths, assemblies – it was all there. But as it is said in chapter 29:13

Isaiah 29:13 *“Therefore the LORD said: “Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,”*

Their hearts were far from God – it was repetition all right, but without feeling.

Rut is the next phase. The rut is bondage to the rote. We have been doing things by rote, but now we get to a point where we cannot sense, nor see, that we are simply repeating without feeling. We do not sense that it is wrong to sing hymns and feel nothing; it is wrong to hear the Word of God and feel quite distant from it; it is wrong

to go Monday to Saturday with very little of our lives actually controlled by conscious thoughts about God's Word. When we are in a rut, we are doing the rote, and do not realise we are not getting anywhere.

There is activity, but no progress. There is action, but no improvement. We are doing things like attending church, reading the Bible and watching Christian DVDs, or listening to sermons, but we are essentially the same. We are in a rut.

Israel was not only doing the same things, they could not sense that it had long ago become detestable to God. They had forgotten there was supposed to be more in their relationship with God than a mere repetition of certain acts. So in bondage were they to simply repeating certain things, they did not notice the life and joy and true experience of God had leaked out of their lives; until God called for a suspension of their entire religious system.

Imagine that! God saying – *'Quit everything. Put the whole thing on pause till you get right with me'*.

I try to imagine a New Testament version of this:

'For what purpose is your church service? I have had enough of hymns and prayers and sermons. When you come to appear before me, who has required the money you put in the offering bag? Do not bring anything more. Your prayer meetings; your Sunday school; your Wednesday night Bible studies; your discipleship hour; I cannot endure. Your Lord's Supper and baptism celebration my soul hates, I cannot endure them.'

Apparently God takes this very seriously. God is not prepared to allow us to deceive ourselves further into thinking we are fine if we just keep on doing what we have always been doing.

Perhaps we are ones who trusted that time would be our spiritual helper. We knew that we were just going through the motions and not making much progress, we knew in fact that we had regressed from where we were. And we said to ourselves – *'Just give me more time, and I will be fine. In a few months, in a year – I will once again be committed and back to where I should be. Once I've got this new job nailed down; once I've finished school; once I've completed my degree; once I'm financially independent; once the kids have 'outgrown this phase'; once things slow down at work'*. But we have found that time cheated us. Time has become our enemy. It did not pull us out of the rote, and now time is actually digging us deeper into the rut.

We are older, but not holier. We are closer to our end, but not closer to God.

Perhaps we are ones who thought that other Christians should pull us out of the rut. We knew we had fallen, and we waited for them to come and cheer us on and pull us out, and push us forwards. But, apparently by God's providence, they did not come; or if they did, we did not notice. And so, with our pride feeling wounded and self-pity burning in us, we continue to spin our wheels and get deeper into a rut of repetition without feeling.

Perhaps we are ones who decided that we should just scale back on our whole commitment to the Christian life. After all, it wasn't changing us, it wasn't bringing us much joy. So, we are those drivers who think if spinning the wheels is not getting us out, we may as well lift the foot off the accelerator. So we basically cut back on being in the Word and prayer, we scaled church back down to the bare minimum, we gave up trying to beat that habit in our life. We stopped trying and accepted the rut as the way things are, and the way things will be.

And that brings us to the third and last phase.

Rot is the third condition that Tozer spoke of. We slip into the rote and, if we do not move out, it becomes a rut and, if we stay there, it becomes rot. There is spiritual decay.

It is the decay of faith that starts to die. We have become so accustomed to what we do, we have lost any expectation for something different. The lack of emotion in our hearts when we sing doesn't bother us. Our distractedness during worship hardly concerns us. Our distance from other believers we consider normal. Our lack of evangelism has settled comfortably into us.

There is no expectation for anything more. There is little to no desire for God to come and ignite our hearts for Him, and cause our quiet times to be wondrous, and our worship services to be filled with the presence of God.

Once rot has set in, it is a matter of time before there is death.

Here Israel was rotting from within. The religious rut had them thinking their lack of love for God was fine. So long had they been blinded by their religious activity, that they could no longer see that they were very far from being pleasing to God. In fact, look closely and we will see the kind of sins which were breeding and multiplying within Israel

Once rot has set in, it is like living in a 'two-tier' mentality – where one does not influence the other.

The church at Ephesus was in a rut. But the church at Sardis was rotting.

Revelation 3:1 *"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."*

Now the alternative to rote, rut and rot is revival.

Revival, as the name suggests is new life. You have heard me say, '*I do not believe we need to have an alter call to revival every Sunday*'. I believe in steady growth – progressive sanctification. But there also comes a time, when God's people have allowed the rote to become a rut and then even rot – and that is when revival needs to happen.

What should we expect if there is revival?

Firstly, there will be a sense of God's **Presence**. Now I know that God is omnipresent, He is present everywhere at the same time. *The Presence* and *the manifestation of the Presence* are not the same. There can be the one without the other. God is here when we are wholly unaware of it. "He is manifest only as, and when, we are aware of His presence". (The Pursuit of God - Tozer).

David writes in Psalm 139 that there is nowhere He can go to escape God. God is everywhere. So then why did David cry out to be at the house of God? Because, at the house of God, he expected to be receptive to the manifestation of God's presence. As we study the revival of the Old Testament; study the revivals of the New Testament; study the revivals of church history; we will find that there comes upon the people a massive sense that God is here.

When revival swept over Israel under Ezra and Nehemiah, the people were so overcome by the truth of God's holiness and mercy they wept; and the priests had to call on them to stop weeping because God wanted them to rejoice. They were not weeping at mere concepts or ideas. God was as real as He was true to them at that point.

When Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon in 1741 called '*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*' to his home church in Massachusetts, nothing much happened. But that same year, he preached it again to a congregation in Connecticut. The sense of God's greatness, and power, and anger, over sin, so gripped the people that many began to shriek and groan and cry out for mercy while he was preaching. Was he a preacher that shouted and screamed and worked people into a frenzy? No. He actually read his sermons word for word over his glasses, in more or less a monotone. So how did that happen? God worked in power, and people overwhelmingly sensed what had been true all along. God is here, and He is to be feared, and believed and obeyed.

Genesis 28:16 "And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not."

Luke 5:8 "When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

The Spirit of God opens our eyes to the presence of Christ. He is here. He is active. He is glorious.

Secondly, there will be the proof of God's **power**. When God is at work, the works He does are powerful works. Now, I do not mean people falling down backwards, I do not mean supposed healings, although I do believe God can heal whomever He wants, whenever He wants.

No, we mean power in the sense of God working in unmistakable ways. The preached Word is unusually clear, convicting and life-changing. It seems to come at us like a force, pulling off our masks and laying us bare before God. It destroys self-deception and shows us Christ as glorious, to be admired and worshipped.

Power means that God works in hearts; sinners are deeply convicted of sin and righteousness and judgement. Their desire to be saved becomes overwhelmingly urgent.

Believers are found going out with a holy boldness to share the Gospel. And as they do, people are drawn.

Power means our prayer meetings are full, as God's people expect to receive something. Prayers are specifically asked and specifically answered.

When the Spirit came in power at Pentecost, what were the results? Three thousand swept into the kingdom, more added daily; a church of one accord, breaking bread from house to house, continuing in the apostles doctrine and prayer, distributing their goods as anyone had need, signs and wonders performed, fear upon every soul, praising God.

I understand some things about Pentecost were unique and non-repeatable, but do not let that become an excuse for a powerless, dry Christianity.

In 1904, a man by the name of Evan Roberts was a coal miner in Wales. For thirteen years previously, he had been praying for revival in Wales. In October of that year, he was at a prayer meeting and, after the meeting, 17 young people stayed behind to hear his message. It was a simple message with four points:

1. We must put away any unconfessed sin.
2. We must put away any doubtful habit.
3. We must obey the Spirit promptly.
4. We must confess Christ publicly.

All 17 responded to his message and chose to keep meeting nightly for prayer. God began to work in power. More and more began coming to the meetings. Lost people were dramatically converted - seventy thousand in two months; eighty five thousand in five months; and over one hundred thousand in the six months following that meeting.

God worked in power.

Thirdly, revival means, there will be **Progress**.

The illustration of a car spinning its wheels shows that energy expended does not mean progress. Progress would be if we move forward with the car. We might remember from high school physics about distance vs. displacement. If we run the 400 meters – we have run a distance of 400 metres, but our displacement is zero, because the finish line is right where we started. We covered distance, but we actually did not make any progress; we did not move from where we were.

We can have an exercise bike which records our distance, and ride 5 kilometres, but make no mistake, we have not left the room.

For many Christians, they mistake activity for progress. They make motions like church attendance; watching some Christian DVDs; listening to some Christian music; reading some Christian books; reading the Bible now and then – but for all the activity, there is no progress. The life is not becoming more like Christ. There is not more wisdom in decisions. There is not more of self surrender, and more of Christ ruling the life. There is not more joy and satisfaction in Christ. There are the same sins; same worldliness; same testimony before family and colleagues.

When revival comes, there is progress. It is more than simply motion. We can tell that the church has made progress. It is not merely growing in numbers, but in holiness, in joy, in a rootedness in the Word.

The individual Christian has tangible, measurable changes in his or her life – new ways of speaking, of thinking, of relating. The life is filled with a clear growth, to be more like Christ.

Every time a revival took place in Scripture – under Samuel, under Asa, under Jehoshaphat, under Hezekiah, under Josiah, under Ezra and Nehemiah or in Nineveh – there was change. People repented of idolatry, of neglecting the Law, of not serving God, of breaking His covenant. They made amends, they kept the feasts, they began to do what was right.

In the 1904 revival in Wales there was clear progress. Bars and taverns were closed for lack of business. Crime dropped drastically. People paid old debts and made restitution for thefts and other wrongs. The mines slowed because the mules couldn't understand the new clean language of the miners!

The Presence of God. The Power of God. The Progress brought by God.

Is that what our heart craves?

Do we realise that the Presence, the Power and the Progress are the normal Christian life?

My goal this morning is to expose the rut to those of us who can hear. I will, Lord willing, look at Scripture's solutions to getting out of the rut next week, and the following. My desire is that the Lord would do some 'waking up' of those who have fallen asleep in their rut, and have come to expect nothing else. I trust we would walk out desirous of getting out of the rut, to do something different, to experience revival. If you cannot even get uncomfortable about being in a rut, you are in a very dangerous place, and there is little I can do for you.

We could go to the morgue and get some corpses and dress them up in Sunday clothes, and put make up on them so we would not know they were dead. And we might prop them up on certain chairs and put a pew Bible in their laps. Now, I could then take a needle, and go about pricking everyone. Do you know the dead people in the congregation would have the least amount of trouble? The most comfortable people in church should always be the dead ones.

It is the living who would flinch, or say '*ouch*' or shriek or complain. The dead would do nothing, because they cannot feel the needle.

When we speak about the rote, rut and rot and we feel absolutely nothing, we should be concerned for our very soul. Because, if we are saved, we have sensitivity to our spiritual state. So if someone comes and says, '*this is rut and not revival*', something should happen. You should be mad at me, or sad that we are that way, or glad that we

are finally getting a way out. But if it hardly reaches you, similar to listening to a man lecture on ancient Macedonian tapestries, then we are like those corpses.

The Bible tells us what we ought to be and what we could be. If we have no desire to be something other than we are this possibly means that Christ's nature does not dwell within us. God's Spirit has never come in to dwell, and therefore His Word does not resonate within us.

So, my **first** question would be, '*Are you born again?*' '*Are you saved?*' If you answer 'Yes,' on what basis in the present, not in the past, do we make that claim?

When we ask that question, some people immediately refer us to the past – '*I accepted Jesus on such-and-such a date*'. Very well, but what evidence of Christ's life is there in you now? Imagine, we see some plants in a vase, but we cannot see if they have been cut and put in water, or if there is soil in the vase and they have been planted. We ask the owner '*Are those plants alive or dead?*' He says – '*They are alive.*' We say, '*How do you know?*' He says, '*Because they were once planted.*' Well, that would be a foolish answer. The fact that they were planted does not mean they are alive now. The fact that a person claims to have trusted Christ in the past does not mean they actually did so in the Biblical sense of the term. The real test is, what is the evidence now?

One of the best signs of life is appetite. A human body, to nourish itself and keep itself going, causes us to be hungry and thirsty. When someone totally loses their appetite, we know they are sick. And were we to find a human who had no appetite or no thirst for years, we would know we were dealing with a corpse, because life generates hunger.

In the same way, spiritual life generates hunger for more spiritual life. Spiritual life will hear the Word of God, hate the thought of lifeless religion, and hunger for something more. It will hear about revival and a kind of thirst will well up in the soul, a longing for more life.

The unsaved man will not have this hunger. So, my first call is to you who have not felt much through this message, but now feel concern that you have not felt much. I call you to read 2 Corinthians 13:5 – examine yourself whether you be in the faith.

My **second** challenge then is to the Christian. You who recognise you are in a rut.

How badly do you want to get out?

The reason I ask this is that Jesus told us to consider carefully the cost of following Him. God does not want us in a rut, but He is not going to pull us out, apart from us meeting certain conditions. Are you willing to do whatever God tells you to do to get out? Or are you playing games, and you actually intend to keep spinning your wheels, which is easier than getting out and pushing and getting dirty?

I hope you will face that question thoughtfully. Because it might be – in fact it probably will be – life-changing. For you to climb out of a spiritual rut will mean everything God tells you to stop doing, you will stop doing. And everything He tells

you to start doing, you will start doing. So here it is, verse 19 - *'if you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land'*

But if you are not, if your goal is to keep on doing this Christian life at your convenience, keeping your pet sins, keeping the basic lifestyle and priorities and discipline and use of time and money, then do not apply. God knows before you open your mouth to sing *'I Surrender All'* exactly what is in your heart.

But if you are willing to come, although you might feel as if you are walking blind and naked towards the edge of the cliff – if you are truly willing to bring God's authority to bear on every part of your life – then God will not stop you. Revival is not something God has on the top shelf, and we only get it when we reach high enough. Revival is actually on the bottom shelf, and is waiting for us if we will come down from our pride and selfishness and wilfulness and unbelieving lives. God is Present. God is Powerful. God Desires our Progress. But such awareness and experience does not come to the rebellious, the stubborn, the disobedient, the unbelieving, the proud.

Are you hungry for this? If not, check your spiritual pulse to make sure you are His. If you are – are you willing to do whatever necessary to get there? The answer each of gives is the answer that will determine if revival comes to us individually and as a body.