

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Can These Gen Zers Lead a Religious Revival?

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

Over the past two weeks, tens of thousands of people, most of them college students, poured into a small chapel with wooden pews at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. Some drove to the chapel from South Carolina and Oklahoma.

Others flew in from other countries, places like Canada and Singapore, and many of these people were weeping.

They waited in line for hours, sometimes in the rain or snow, to stand next to people that they shared little in common with except for a single conviction.

God was visiting a two-stoplight town in Kentucky, and they wanted to be there for it. It's not news that religion has been on the decline in America for a long time now, but last year, for the first time in American history, House of Worship membership dropped below 50% for a little bit of context that number was 70% in 1999.

And nowhere is the decline in religion and in religious affiliation more dramatic than it is when you look at our youngest generation at Gen Z.

Young adults under 23 are the most likely Americans yet to say that they don't believe in God.

They're also the least religiously affiliated and the least likely to go to church.

Zoomers also happen to be a generation riddled with anxiety and depression, and they're inundated with nihilistic and fatalistic messages all over the culture in TV shows and songs and music.

In poll after poll, we find that they're the generation with the least positive outlook on life.

Just recently, the CDC published a report stating that almost 60%, 60% of female students experience persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year.

And yet in this chapel, God, faith, meaning, hope, they've been on full display.

What's been happening here since Wednesday is there's a young army of believers who are rising to claim Christianity, the faith as their own, as a young generation and as a free generation, and that's why people can't get enough.

God moved so many young people to non-stop prayer, more than 250 hours of it, at a moment like this and in a culture like ours.

How did this revival come to be?

And why is it happening right now?

Today, Free Press reporter Olivia Reingold explains from the chapel at the Asbury Revival. Stay with us.

My favorite new publication is the journal Sapir, a publication featuring bold, unapologetic Jewish voices and edited by my friend and New York Times columnist Brett Stevens.

Sapir shares ideas about how to create a thriving Jewish future in its quarterly issues with themes like culture, education, and more.

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That's [cozyearth.com slash B-A-R-I](https://cozyearth.com/slash/B-A-R-I).

Olivia, welcome to Honestly.

Thank you for having me.

I'm happy to be here.

So you spent the last weekend on campus at Asbury University, where this two-week revival took place.

You got there on day nine of nonstop prayer.

Tell me how all of this began.

So it began on a Wednesday.

Students at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky, which is a small Christian college, have mandatory chapel service three times a week.

And so this all began with a chapel service that students are required to attend.

And this morning, a volunteer soccer coach, Zach McCreebs, gave a sermon.

We're going to continue in Romans 12.

That's the star.

Okay.

God's word.

And Jesus, the Holy Spirit moving in our midst.

That's what we're hoping.

So did I forget my clicker?

Nope.

It's right here, y'all.

Big green sign.

Awesome.

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Last time we talked, but coming up now.

Zach volunteers at the college as a soccer coach.

And he's 32.

He's kind of a hipster.

Like I could picture him maybe working at a coffee shop on a computer or something.

He was wearing tapered jeans and sneakers the day that he went to church.

And he told me he felt totally unprepared going into his sermon that Wednesday.

I had just gotten back into town late Tuesday night and honestly was just exhausted and didn't have time to prep my sermon.

So I woke up early and I drove to a coffee shop and I'd been given a passage of scripture.

So there's the Old Testament, New Testament, and the New Testament.

There's four gospels that are kind of like the stories of Jesus.

And then there's these letters that are copies of letters that went to cities about what was going on in the city.

So it was like.

So he was assigned a piece of scripture and it was a section of Romans.

And he said this one line really stood out to him.

It was a commandment about how to love God and it's very simple.

It's just, quote, let your love be genuine.

The first line is let your love be genuine or in other translations, let your love not be hypocritical, which I'm super passionate about as a Christian, one, because I'd experienced a ton of ungenuine love.

So I'm passionate about the church and Christians like living that out.

So I read it's 13 verses, 9 through 21, with 30 commands on how we should love one another.

And it's all like radical.

So he showed up to chapel and he started by talking about all the things we say we love.

I love gelato.

I love coffee.

I love tacos in papas lanlata.

But is that different than how I love these people?

These are my girls, right?

Do I love tacos?

Like I love mercy that, that mighty baby in the middle.

Do I love dry cappuccinos like my beautiful wife KP.

And he was differentiating from the things we say we love and the kind of treatment other people tell us is love from actual pure unadulterated love.

It's polluted love.

It's selfish love.

And some of you guys have experienced radically poor love, like evil love, selfish love.

And I would say today, we should not even give it the honor of calling it love.

Some of you have experienced things that should not have even been.

Like honestly, it was probably one of the least planned, definitely least studied, like organized sermon I've ever given.

And he didn't really think that much of his sermon, but he ended with an invitation.

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Anyone who needed to experience the love of God, maybe a senior who was about to graduate, but hadn't felt that in a while to come up on stage.

I pray that this sits on you guys like an itchy sweater.

You got it itch.

You got to take care of it.

So experience his love, become the love of God by experience the love of God.

Amen.

Amen.

So Jesus, I pray as we continue the worship, I pray that people would.

What happened next?

So at first Zach said, you know, maybe about 18 students stayed as the rest of them packed up their bags, went back to class, carried on.

But then other students started getting word.

They were sending out texts to each other saying, Hey, you need to come back here.

Something is happening.

I got a text from my friends and they were like, sent me a video of what was happening in Houston.

People were like, come back to Hughes, like come back everyone.

And we all said, Amen.

So at first, this is contained just within the students and students are texting each other.

You need to come back to the chapel Wednesday morning service never ended.

And then it starts to spread even beyond the students, you know, first administrators find out and then it's people in the town.

Like I spoke to this one guy who lives nearby and he said he was having coffee with some of his friends.

And I guess one of his friends is a professor and anyway, all of their phones just start going off.

And all of a sudden, the guy on my right, his phone, the guy straight across me, the guy on the left.

And they're, they all look at each other and say, you know, there's something happening over Hughes and we might want to go check it out.

And so we walked in and just this move of God, the powerful kind of presence of the spirit, just seeing this next generation come to life, does my heart good.

I mean, my friends came back Tuesday night and they told me and I don't know, it's just like this expectancy, like something's stirring inside of me.

Honestly, I didn't go to sleep till about 2 a.m. Tuesday.

I don't, it was just something like, I don't know, like some sort of excitement bubbling and just a longing to like, okay, I gotta come check this out, you know.

Went into the chapel and don't you know everyone's like praying and worshiping and I just like immediately, I did feel like, I did feel God in that moment.

And then it continued the first few days were very kind of intimate, like just for the student body and, you know, different people in our, in Wilmore, in our community.

And then over time as I got bigger, I was like, okay, this is, this is more than just

like chapel lasted longer for everybody.

Generally over the course of two weeks, tens of thousands of visitors across the country and some even from outside the U.S. travel to this tiny college chapel in Kentucky to experience what now many people are calling a revival.

Which is what exactly?

What is a revival?

So a revival is a spontaneous resurgence of faith that spreads usually at a community level but occasionally throughout the entire nation.

Now some are calling it a renewal or an awakening or an outpouring because they say it's too early to label it a revival.

But for many people I spoke to, this is very much a revival of faith.

I think about revival and I think about 18th century America.

I think about like a revival tent being set up in a field, you know, and I think about it as something, frankly, that happened a few centuries ago, not now.

So I'm curious if the students that you spoke with had any explanation of why now and why Wilmore Kentucky?

Yeah, I think it's really interesting that this started on a college campus and a lot of the students I spoke with were pretty quick to reveal that they had struggled with anxiety or depression themselves and they really spoke to a crisis of faith among their generation. Like one student said that she was sick of crying.

Like anytime she logged on to social media, she would see something that was so upsetting. She mentioned the recent Michigan State shooting and, you know, all the things they missed during COVID lockdowns and another said that he felt like his friends were getting distracted by things that were, quote, meaningless at the end of the day, like the prospect of social media fame.

And many of them said they'd been praying for a resurgence of faith in their community for a long time, like this 18-year-old student named Ava Miller.

You walk around and you can see just like how heavy the world is.

I mean, there's so much darkness and so much injustice and you just like, you know there has to be something more.

And so we've just been praying that like God would show up and like unveil our eyes and like give us that something more we crave.

That was a common theme that students had prayed for this sometimes for years.

Some of them because they grew up hearing about a previous revival that happened at Asbury in 1970 and wanted that for their own generation.

What was moving people to travel from around the country to see this?

One woman told me she had been struggling with addiction since she was 18 and she's now 34.

And when we met, she was waiting in line in the rain and she really wanted to present her new self to God because for the first time in her life, she's sober.

We just come here to get blessed and be able to bless other people, you know.

We want, we crave that feeling for God and we want our blessing and we want to be able to bless other people.

As I'm walking closer, I'm just, I'm getting goosebumps and I'm crying because it's just

and strong.

It's so strong coming up here.

Do you feel like this is something that you like needed?

Definitely.

I definitely needed this.

I have, I have struggled my whole life and I have walked closer with God the past six, seven months and this is just something that I know I need.

I need my spirit.

I'm just so excited.

I'm so happy I'm here.

Another woman I spoke to came with her mom and I saw what was happening here and I was telling my mom on the way here, I think in my, my generation, my lifetime, I'd grown up hearing about like Graham.

And said she grew up hearing about Billy Graham, the American evangelist who led what he called Crusades all across the 1940s and then became hugely popular across the country in the 50s, 60s and 70s.

And she said she thought this was her best chance at participating in something like that.

I think this is the only access I'll have in my lifetime, at least so far, to revival.

It's like when you have a fire in a fireplace and you add a couple logs and you stoke the fire and it, and it roars, it's that.

The fire, the Holy Spirit, it's been stoke.

It's a gathering of people like-minded who want to get together and, and worship the Lord and be together.

It kind of-

But it's the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Yeah, inspires other people too to come and be a part of something really wonderful.

What was happening inside those four walls for most of 24 hours a day, for two weeks straight?

What was it like to be inside that chapel?

When you finally get to the front of the line and get to go inside, the chapel was bursting with sound.

There seems to be more singing than speaking.

Students from Asbury University were piled onto the stage, swaying.

One time when I was in there, I noticed a man with an oxygen tank in the back.

There were guys with cowboy boots and muddy jeans leaning against a stained glass window.

I noticed a woman breastfeeding under a scarf.

There were babies, but miraculously, none of them were crying and everyone was singing everyone seemed to know the words to these songs.

In between songs, sometimes a pastor would ask anyone who needed to get something off their chest to approach the altar, and I saw a few of those.

So I'm a senior here and I'm also on the basketball team here.

I tore my heelies about over a year ago and I got surgery and a PT, I got back, got cleared my thoracic new year to finish out this last year playing basketball, but I still had pain.

It was just kind of, I thought that's how it was going to be.

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I did pain management before practice, I would just ice my foot and just wake up, olympic me, and just kind of deal with it and it'll get better throughout the day.

But while we're here, I had a group of people pray over me and they asked if there was anything that I wanted to pray over and I was kind of hesitating it, but I was like, could you pray healing over me?

And so they did and literally since I've woken up, I have not lived, I have not ever tried.

People got up there and they said that they were having sports injuries healed by God.

So God's a healer, guys, I know.

Broken hearts healed by God, anxiety healed by God.

So a few years ago, I used to struggle with a lot of anxiety and I was praying for God to help me, but I feel like he wasn't really helping me, but in reality he was really working and now I'm not the same person I was.

A few years ago, God has really helped me through this hard time and one of the verses that really comes from this Philippians 4.67 says, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by my reputation, the things giving you, send your request to God and then peace of God which you have all understand and will guard your hearts and your minds and Christ Jesus.

Come on.

Come on.

And I was sitting in the pews next to this college student who seemed really moved by the whole thing, so I asked him to describe it to me and his name is Garrett English and he's a student at Clemson University in South Carolina and he drove with a few friends to experience the revival.

Well, first of all, will you just describe what's happening all around us right now?

Absolutely.

We're seeing a great awakening of 18 to 25 year olds.

This right here, this is amazing.

We are seeing college age students who are fighting for other college age students' faith here in Asbury, Kentucky.

Lord, for people all across the country, all across the world, are getting to pour in and that's what we're getting to see right now is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

A few people told me that this experience had reconnected them to their faith and one Asbury student, a 21 year old named Gracie Turner, even told me that she entered the chapel disenchanted with God after watching her great grandmother die of cancer and then her family falling apart.

I was too scared to tell my parents that I had lost my faith.

I remember I resented God.

There was a lot of times I was so homesick and the stuff that had happened right before I came, I would lay in bed sometimes and just pray to God.

It would be really nice if I didn't wake up tomorrow.

I was so depressed.

And she had kept that disenchantment a secret from most people at Asbury since it's a Christian college until she went to the revival a few days after it started and says something overcame her.

She couldn't stop crying and actually felt compelled to go on stage and share her story with the crowd.

I just cry because though the emotions that I'm feeling are so overwhelming and I actually felt shared, I got up and shared my testimony in front of more than a thousand people and I have the worst anxiety ever and I stood up there crying telling people about how this week I've been so depressed and feel like I'm at my end and a revival happens the day I feel like I'm at my breaking point and now I feel relieved.

I feel better and I feel like God is trying to steer me back to him.

So Olivia, having watched all of these people, some of them your age, many of them younger than you, get up, cry, sing, bear their hearts in front of perfect strangers, what feeling did it leave you with?

So I am not a religious or probably even a spiritual person.

My mom is a really steadfast atheist, like in your face, atheist, and my dad is I think what you would call a secular Jew and I don't know if I've ever stepped foot in a church.

I don't think I had ever met anyone who actually has an earnest belief in God.

And so I was out of my element here and I will admit I don't think I necessarily felt the presence of God in the room.

I think being not a very spiritually inclined person, I think the only thing that was palpable to me was a real human energy, but a very profound one nonetheless, like human kindness and optimism and gratitude for the essentials of what make a good life.

And I think that that is what was radical to me about it is that it's like the opposite of like my friends in Brooklyn, what they think of as a good time.

And I think what stood out to me is that people were really like having fun too.

Like they felt a lot of connection and really felt a sense of community.

And to me, no one really gave me a clear answer as to why this happened at this moment.

Like why now?

But I think that that's probably as close to an answer as we can get because at this time when a lot of the students were telling me about how much of a distraction social media can feel like and then how during COVID lockdowns, you know, their life only became more online. And to me, I think that this was really an antidote to that.

It was just about good old fashioned human connection.

Music

My grandkids connecting with what God's doing.

You know, I could probably do a salsa dance about that time.

Yeah, it's pretty exciting to see how God's moving in the hearts of young people and the children.

And in the youth age, I also think there's something happening in the population of those of us who are gray.

And that might be, Olivia, that I would say from just my words, we really need to be blessing these people and holding the door open for them.

For the generation that's coming up.

Why does that make you choke up?

Just because I've seen it in a number of places of the world now.

And sometimes the gray hair wants to hold on.

And no, no, no, no, no.

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We have got to pass the baton graciously, hold doors open.

Music

We'll be right back.

Music

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Olivia, one thing that you hear a lot among people under the age of 40 is that God is dead and that religion is dead.

And that's sort of like the baseline assumption. Has seeing what you saw in Kentucky changed your mind about that?

Seeing these young people just so sincere in their faith really, I think, hammers home that regardless of what you believe,

you cannot deny that there are young people out there who earnestly believe in God.

And now, I think you could say have kicked off a movement of sorts.

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The students who are at the heart of this revival might not have been able to answer why exactly it started at Asbury or why exactly it started in February 2023.

But it's pretty easy to look at our culture where there's such an epidemic of loneliness and alienation and such a crisis of meaning,

and people are yearning for something bigger than themselves.

They're yearning for things that are, you know, whether you call it God or not, but like ancient needs of community and belonging and meaning.

To what extent do you connect where we are culturally as America right now to what you saw happen in that chapel?

So Asbury, I think we briefly touched on this, has a history of revivals.

And the most significant one was in 1970, which was also a time of great turmoil.

So that was a year when college campuses erupted in often violent protests, often about the Vietnam War.

That is the year that four students at Kent State in Ohio were shot by National Guardsmen.

And while that was going on, Asbury University students were praying for a week straight.

And so I think the context cannot be ignored.

And I would refer back to what students told me.

And often when I sat down with them, a lot of what they had to say was how many of their friends were dealing with anxiety and depression.

I heard it when kids who looked like they were maybe 11, 12 years old getting on stage and telling the chapel packed with people that they had been really struggling with mental health issues.

And they were talking about how often they encounter really upsetting news that they often feel powerless over.

Olivia Reingold, thanks so much for going to Kentucky and thanks so much for being here.

Thanks for having me, Barry.

Thanks so much for listening as always.

If you like what you heard, if you think religion is dead, or if you really don't and you're heading to a renewal or revival somewhere else around the country,

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