

Nehemiah 8
Holy Revival
March 3, 2019

As we've been studying the book of Nehemiah over the past several weeks, we've looked at the building project that God's people undertook. They wanted to see Jerusalem rebuilt. And that got me thinking this week about other large building projects most of us are familiar with:

Golden Gate Bridge: This bridge serves as an iconic image for San Francisco and the entire state of California. For several decades it was the longest and tallest bridge in the world! It took four years to build. And of course, it has a purpose: to connect people from San Francisco to Marin County.

Hoover Dam: This massive structure was built between the years 1931 and 1936, with the help of over 5,000 workers. By blocking the flow of the Colorado River, it creates the largest man-made reservoir in all of North America. An incredible accomplishment, but it had a purpose: to supply water and power to residents in Nevada, California, and Arizona.

Panama Canal: Think about the Panama Canal. This 48-mile-long, man-made body of water took decades to complete and nearly 30,000 people died trying to complete it. And of course it serves a unique purpose: it connects the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans and allows about 15,000 ships per year to pass through it.

All of these are massive building projects. And they were all undertaken for a reason. And here's what I want us to remember-Nehemiah's building project was for a reason. It wasn't because they loved playing with bricks and mortar. It wasn't so they wanted something pretty to sit back and look at. It was so the city could be reestablished, so the culture could be restored and so the people could experience spiritual renewal. That's why Nehemiah was so committed to this project.

Last week we saw the wall was rebuilt. They finished it in 52 days. Now that the infrastructure of the city has been repaired and the people are dwelling securely, attention can shift away from external things like brick and mortar and onto internal things, like the condition of the people's hearts and cultural values that needed to be reformed.

We are in chapter 8 today (turn there). Our passage today is an example of one of the first revivals in recorded history. A revival is where people, in mass, return to God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Revivals have happened dozens and dozens of times throughout history (first great awakening, the second great awakening, the Azusa street revival in the early 1900s, the Jesus movement in the 1970s, etc). This is one of the first. As we study this passage we are going to learn that spiritual renewal is marked by three characteristics. I hope that we not only learn those three characteristics, but that as we study this example of spiritual renewal in the pages of Scripture, we would not only be inspired and encouraged, we would walk away with a deep-seated desire to see spiritual renewal in our day and in our time. How great would it be if, in the coming years, when we talk about revivals and spiritual renewal, we didn't just have to go to the pages of Scripture to see examples. We didn't just have to go to the history books and read other people's stories. We could look at our own lives and could tell our own stories

because we had seen with our own eyes God do more than we could ever have asked or imagined.

Let's jump in 8:1-6 **All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate.** (About 50,000...twice the amount of Bankers Life Fieldhouse) **They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. 2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. 4 Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. 5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.**

What stands out to me right away is that: **Spiritual renewal is marked by worshipful expectation.** We all know what it's like to anxiously await something special. Students anxiously await the last day of school. Business leaders anxiously await a big closing. Single people anxiously await the night of that first date. Sports fans anxiously await the big game. We all know what it's like to anxiously await something special. What if we had that sort of anxious anticipation and worshipful expectation to meet with God? Whether that is coming to church on Sunday, or opening up your bible on Tuesday, or going for a prayer walk on Friday....Where we said, "I can't wait to be in the presence of God! I can't wait to hear his word! I can't wait to respond with worship!" I'm not doing these spiritual activities because it's what my parents told me to do or what my wife wants me to do or because I feel a sense of duty and obligation. This is my delight. I can't wait to be in the presence of God.

We see their sense of worshipful expectation in two ways. Take a look: **(As Ezra opened the book) the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 8:5-6**

Several things to take note of: **The people stood up.** When someone new walks into a room, well-mannered people stand up as an expression of honor. When the national anthem is sung, everyone stands up as an expression of honor. When a bride walks down the aisle, people stand up as an expression of honor. Standing up is a way of recognizing that something special is taking place. They stood up for the preaching of the Word. They realized how important it was. They had a worshipful expectation.

Also take note: **All the people lifted their hands.** They weren't emotionally disengaged. They weren't there as spectators. With their whole bodies they participated in worship and prayer.

I want to say a word to the men of our church. If you are a guy and you are visiting, maybe you are not a believer and you are just checking this place out; I'm not speaking directly to you. I'm speaking to the men who are followers of Jesus and call this church home.

I want to encourage you and challenge you to raise your hands in worship. We raise our hands when a team we love puts a ball through a rim. We raise our hands when we get a promotion or something exciting happens. And I want to encourage you to raise your hands when you are worshipping God. And I'm not saying this because it is my personal preference. I'm saying this because we see an example of it here in Nehemiah. And we also see this in **1 Timothy 2:8** **Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands.** I'm not saying that every time the C chord is struck you have to shoot them both up. But if you would come here and listen to the Word, and hear three or four songs play and stand there and not sing, or kind of sing with your hands at your side or in your back pocket...guess what, you are actually not catching the heart of Scripture. It's not about personality. It's not about preference, it's about what pleases the heart of God, it's about what we see in the Word of God. It's a way of saying, I'm not just going to worship the Lord with my heart and mind, but also with my body--so my entire being is bringing him praise.

This was something I struggled with for years. I was always reluctant to respond physically to worship. I was inspired when I saw it from others, but too shy or self-conscious to do it myself. I didn't jump in the deep end with a touchdown all of a sudden, but I began extending my hands in a song as a sign of surrender, or placing my hand over my heart in devotion, and then I began feeling more and more free, when it seemed right, to lift up my hands in worship. God, I love you. God, I need you. God, I thank you. God, I with all that I am, I worship you. Wherever we might be at on that spectrum, let's take one more step.

And if you are here with your family, God is not the only one watching. So is your wife. So are your kids. Even if they don't say this to you, they need to see you set the tone for worship in the family. I was talking to a guy in my life group about this, and this guy doesn't like responding in worship. It's just not his thing. But he said he remembers one time being at a Christian concert when he was really moved, and he raised his hands...his four kids were with him, within seconds, every one of them raised their hands, too. Why? Because husbands and fathers set the spiritual tone and the atmosphere for their family.

Take a look at what continues to happen as the Word of God is being preached: **7 The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. 8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.** What we discover here is that spiritual renewal is marked not only by worshipful expectation, but also by **Biblical Authority**. When they gathered, they gave attention to the Word of God. Ezra didn't get up and give some 7 different points about how to have your best life now. What we see here isn't self-help preaching or inspirational preaching or educational preaching, but the reading of the Word of God and the explanation of the Word of God so that people know how to understand it and apply it to their daily lives. Take a look at that passage again: **7 The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. 8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.**

Some of the stuff they read was confusing. Some of it was hard to comprehend and know how to apply. So what did the leaders do? They explained it! That is our goal and hope every time we come to worship on Sunday. We want to read from the Word. And one of our pastors will have spent hours and hours, reading, studying, analyzing and praying over that passage, so that we can do the best possible job helping everyone not only understand what is being said, but how we can live it out. We don't want you walking out of here having heard from us; we want you walking out of here having heard from God.

Listen to what David Guzik has said about this passage: **“The revival began by the Spirit of God working through the word of God. And it will happen that way again today, as well.”** Friends, he's right. In fact, if you study the revivals of history, every one of them began as God's people gave renewed attention and devotion to the Word of God. When God's people give renewed attention to his Word, they see his favor hand at work. When God's people neglect his word, they see the opposite.

Let's look at just the last 100 years of our own country as a tragic example. About 100 years ago many of the mainline denominations like the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists and others began distrusting the Bible. Their scholars talked about demythologizing the Bible. Let's strip away all of the things in the Bible that our modern sensibilities tell us are clearly not true--miracles, the resurrection, the distinction between manhood and womanhood, sexual ethics, the sorts of things it was good for the simpletons of centuries gone by to believe, but not us well-educated westerners. I think that out of misguided good intentions they wanted to keep their expression of faith relevant to the modern world. That's why they preached less and less from the bible and more from pop psychology. And I say this with despair of heart and not one-ounce of pleasure. But guess what has happened to all of their churches? The more and more they have moved away from the foundation of God's word, the more and more people have left their churches. In seeking to keep themselves perpetually relevant, they've rendered themselves irrelevant and soon to be obsolete. Sadly, the only way those churches are keeping their heads above water financially is by selling off their beautiful, historical buildings and watching developers turn them into coffee shops, antique stores and retrofit apartment buildings. It happened because they moved away from the Word of God.

Look at the religious landscape. Where is revival happening? Where is there a fresh work of God? Not among the people who are changing the Word to fit their sensibilities, but among the people who are changing their sensibilities to fit the unchanging Word of God.

Over the course of time there may be many things that change about this church. Our building might change. Our website might change. Our methods might change. One thing that will never change is our unwavering commitment to the Word of God. Colossians 3:16 says **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”** That's what we want to do. And one of the things that encourages me the most is that it's actually happening around here. In just the last couple of months, I've heard stories like...

- Many of our life groups are reading through the Bible in a year together.
- A life group of women memorizing all of Psalm 139 together.
- A guy at our church memorizing the entire Sermon on the Mount.
- A few friends committed to memorizing the book of James together. All five chapters.

- At our all-night prayer, 250 people read through the entire book of Romans in one sitting, at 2 in the morning.
- A group of men meeting every Tuesday morning to pray through the book of Proverbs, one chapter at a time.
- A single guy at our church reading through the entire Bible in one month. 40 chapters a day.
- A person committing to not open Netflix until they finished the entire New Testament.
- Listen to this letter I received in the mail: Dear Pastor Dan— “I attended your church once this summer and while there was invited to a bible study. Though it was a long drive and I was intimidated, I came. I was inspired to go deeper in my reading of the Word. I now immerse myself in it daily. I am being transformed.”

The Word of God is changing lives! I don't know who I heard say this first, **“The presence of God is released when the Word of God is preached.”** That is so true. Do you want personal breakthrough? Do you want to see God do fresh and awe-inspiring things in and through your life? Do you want spiritual renewal? If so, turn your heart to Scripture. And do whatever it takes to understand it. Spiritual renewal is marked by the exposition of God's Word. Let's look again at how this story wraps up: **9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. 10 Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” 11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.” 12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.**

So we see that spiritual renewal is marked not only by worshipful expectation, by Biblical authority, and also by **Conviction and Celebration**. These people didn't just gather expectantly and listen to the Word attentively; they allowed the Word to impact them deeply. It began with conviction. Did you take note of 8:9? **For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.** When they heard the God's word, they were immediately convicted. They looked at the Word and were reminded of God's righteous standards and then they looked at their lives and saw the difference, and they wept. They didn't try to change the word to fit their lives. They were broken and contrite that their life didn't fit the Word. Maybe you've been there before. I know I have. I've been there twice in the last month! I see something in the Word, but I don't see it in my life, and there is deep conviction.

Jonathan Edwards, a prominent voice in the 18th century and one of the contributors to the first revival in America would preach long sermons. He would write them out, stand in a pulpit, look down, and with very little vocal inflection, read his sermons word for word. There are many accounts of people listening to his sermons and weeping, wailing, convulsing in tears. Edwards would stop his sermon, ask them to control themselves. They would say, “The Spirit of God is upon us.” He would say, “I still have six more pages.”

When the Word of God is preached, we come under conviction because we see where we have been walking in rebellion, in stubbornness, in pride, in sin. The Word exposes that and we are embarrassed, ashamed, saddened. But that's not where God leaves us! Take a look at the next

verse: **10 Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks** (For me, that is a porterhouse steak and Dr. Pepper!), **and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”** Instead of crying all day long, when you see something wrong, rejoice in the goodness of God! Celebrate! Why should we rejoice in the goodness of God? Why should we celebrate?

Do you know what gives someone the power to walk away from a decade-long addiction?
Do you know what gives someone the power to forgive a parent who abandoned or abused them?
Do you know what gives someone the power to restore a broken marriage?
Do you know what gives someone the power to generously share their resources?
Do you know what the fuel is that sustains ongoing spiritual awakening and worship?

It’s not guilt. It’s not obligation. It’s not duty. Not discipline. It’s delight! It’s the joy of the Lord. The Scriptures say, “In his presence is the fullness of joy. Eternal pleasures are at his right hand.” Listen to what Walter Keiser says: **“Authentic declaration of God’s word, joined with genuine repentance produced unremitting joy. This kind of joy is not the cheap imitation of the world, it’s holy and satisfying joy that exceeds all boundaries. It’s a joy that has its source in the Lord himself. It’s a joy that is founded on a feeling of being restored and back in communion with him. This joy is a stronghold or a fortress which acts as a refuge and a citadel into which a believer can enter. No matter what the temperament of the day or the current issues, the Lord himself serves as our rock and our shelter both in the time of the storm and in the day-to-day enjoyment of his presence.** This world is trying to convince us to chase 1000 different things to find pleasures, none of which will ever fully satisfy. God is offering us lasting joy, indescribable delight that will quench our deepest longings. And it comes through spiritual renewal. It comes through his grace and his presence and his love.

Can I tell you the verse that has been on my mind and heart for about a year now? The verse I just can’t escape because it has a promise I just can’t shake? **Habakkuk 3:2 Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known.** God has done so many great things. We look at Scripture, at passages like Nehemiah, and we are inspired. We look at the way he has worked in history and we are encouraged. We stand in awe! But this is my plea. And I want to ask you to join in this, that we would pray this together as a church family: **Repeat them in our day! In our time, make them known!** We don’t just want spiritual renewal in here (the bible). We want it in here (my life). We want it in here (our church). We want it out there (the community). God, do a great work, in our day, in our time!
Porch. Communion.