

Roots of Revival – Part 1

Nehemiah 8:1-18

"They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

Introduction: Nostalgia often drives revival. A desire to get back to what delighted in our youth or bridges the fond memories of years gone by. Hollywood is experiencing this currently as both television and movie markets are bringing back beloved shows from the 70's, 80's and 90's and finding a readymade audience. From Stephen Kings "IT", to Netflix's "Fuller House", to a current version of "Roseanne", which has inexplicably created much political debate, revival's or remakes are welcomed, intriguing, and responded to.

Other times, revivals are not getting back to the glory days but move into places that people have never been. In the 1730's and 40's in both Britain and American Colonies, the Great Awakening swept through Protestant churches like wildfire. It was a move toward religious devotion that transcended the tight lines of denominations with desire to restore individual piety. Names like George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards were at the forefront, and their legacy is still felt today. This was a movement that focused on **preaching God's Word**, which lead to **conviction of sin, conversion**, and a new birth and new heart which brought about a new desire for **holiness**. It taught there was assurance of salvation, and included every person in conversion, regardless of gender, race, or status, which meant it brought dignity and unity to slaves and freeman alike, which was unheard of at the time. It also spurred on the creation of **missionary societies**, pushing the preaching of the gospel to the unreached of the nations.

Spiritual revivals are hoped for, romanticized, and sometimes we try to force them. At some level we would long for a time when the masses would bow their knee to Christ and worship Him in throngs. The Church has tried different methods, from tent meetings to experientially laden events, with varied or questionable success. Spiritual revival is a work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace resourced to us. It is not finding a "new way", but getting back to the way God has already laid out. Ezra and Nehemiah culminated in a spiritual revival, corporately returning to worshipping God through His Word.

Before unpacking the revival in Jerusalem under Nehemiah and Ezra, its good to step back 200 years before this and show the **roots of revival** are consistent and effective. The Southern Kingdom of Judah had been racked with evil kings for decades, with the pinnacle being a wicked king named **Manasseh**. He ruled for 55 years, and not only did he continue the practices of idol worship, sorcery, and witchcraft, he also did heinous things like *burning his own son as a sacrifice to idols* (2 Kings 21:6) and he had filled Jerusalem from one end to the other with the innocent blood he shed (2 Kings 21:16). This brought on the prophecy by God to give the people to their enemies and forsake the people (21:14). Things were dire, and continued under his son Amon.

Yet the light began to dawn with the birth of Manasseh's grandson Josiah. He was **8 years old** when he became king and was raised in a wicked culture, yet by the time he was **16** he began to seek God (2 Chron. 34:3), and by the time he was **26** he cleansed the land and God's house of idols. Then the book of the Law was "found" (2 Chron 34:14) by Hilkiah the priest, and the Law was read, leading to conviction of sin, humble hearts, and national reform. In the midst of a wicked culture and upcoming judgment, a young man committed himself to God, got rid of idols, studied God's Word, and responded accordingly. **These are the same roots of revival that are always effective.**

Revival in a Corporate Hunger for God's Word (Neh. 8:1-8)

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And **they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses** that the Lord had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, **both men and women and all who could understand** what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he **read** from it facing the square before the Water Gate from **early morning until midday**, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the **ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law**. 4 And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. 6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, **"Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads** and worshiped the Lord with their **faces to the ground**. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,[a] helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. 8 **They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,[b] and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.**

For all the people

Each of us gather here on Sunday morning for different reasons. Some are here out of duty, tradition, or habit. Others are here to make someone else happy, or simply because they have no choice (see: my kids). But others still are here out of joy, necessity, and desire, knowing that sitting under the teaching of God's Word is no chore but rather a vital necessity in our understanding of God, His glory and love. Why you are here makes all the difference, from passive listening to full fledged participation, and that difference is the margin of drudgery or joy.

After the wall was finished, there was a recounting of the people, and Nehemiah 7 is almost a carbon copy of Ezra 2, as the people moved back into Jerusalem, transitioning from a warfare posture to civilian living. But something was different about the people this time around. You see, Ezra had been ministering to the people this whole time, but it seems like his teaching was falling on deaf ears, or at least those with waxy buildup. What was different now?

- **The people wanted the Book of the Law read** - Notice that all the people came to Ezra. This was not pulling teeth. This was not trying to convince people of the importance of gathering. This signaled something new among the people. *They told Ezra to bring the Law!* The motivation came from the people, not just the leadership. When a group of worshipers is truly motivated, effective action will be inevitable. This is the same today, as leaders are to equip the saints for the work of ministry, and when the church as a whole is mobilized, the possibilities are extraordinary.
- **It was not just the men (or adults)** - The reading of the Law was not just designated to the men or leaders, but notice that men and women were gathered. The Bible consistently teaches the unity and high value of each gender, with distinct roles with each. Here, the whole of the community was gathered to worship together. And notice that *"all those who could understand what they heard"* were also gathered. This would have included the youth of the land, meaning God's Word CAN BE understood by our kids, and not necessarily ONLY in Sunday School. We encourage families (although do not demand it) to bring kids in to main service, knowing that God's Word is designed to be understood by all people.
- **It was in public, not the Temple** - Its intriguing that so much effort went into rebuilding the Temple, yet this public worship service took place at the Water Gate (was it secretly recorded?). The Temple would have separated out the genders and ages, but the Water Gate allowed everyone to worship and learn together. There is a subtle shift here, as people were not simply to find their religious identity in a place like the Temple, but they were becoming **"People of the**

Book". Jesus had the same message in John 4, where worship would not be characterized by a Temple or location but by "**spirit and truth**" in the Person of Jesus. We are reminded that this place is NOT sacred in and of itself, but we worship Christ through the Word, and that can happen anywhere, anytime, by anyone who yield to Him.

When Leaders Lead

- **True reverence to God and His Word** - The people gathered around for this worship event, and it's clear that planning went into it. There was a large wooden platform made so that the one reading would be elevated above the people. It was large enough for 13 men to stand up with Ezra. The Word was read and all the people stood, not just in traditional reverence, but in reverence to the Lord. And if you thought our worship service was long, you ain't seen nothing yet. The Law was read for **6 hours as the people stood**. This is why we are all thankful that this section is *descriptive rather than prescriptive*, since an hour and a half is long enough. But this shows that this was not **token** by any means, but the people spent as much effort in **listening** as the leaders did in **communicating and teaching**. REMEMBER, there is much to be done, much effort to be given to listening to preaching and reading if we are truly going to honor the Lord and understand.
- **Goal was UNDERSTANDING** - Four times (2, 3, 7, 8) the word "understanding is used in this section. It was not simply about *reading*, it was making sure that the people understood **what** it meant and **how it applied**. The Word was read, but leaders spread out to "*help the people understand the Law*". They also read **clearly and gave the sense**, meaning the goal of the priests and Levites were to connect an ancient document with the people in their current situation. This would take time, effort, and patience. This is the foundational principle that resonates today. This is the goal in our **preaching** and in our **Bible studies**. We know that understanding God's Word is difficult, yet possible. Understanding the Bible has the goal of knowledge, but that knowledge is active and should create a desire or at least the rails of obedience. True preaching and teaching has a goal of application, persuading the mind and heart to action. In fact, the goal is also to equip people to understand God's Word on their own so that application can be ongoing.

When the Word permeates

- **Responded in Reverence** - The people were motivated. As a preacher/teacher, there is nothing like a hungry group of people to teach to. As the Word was read, the people stood. As the person of God was unpacked and blessed, the people were ready to respond with "**Amen and Amen**", a word of agreement and understanding. They were not passive listeners but active participants.
- **Responded in Worship** - Notice that their response in reverence led to worship - hands raised, heads bowed, and faces toward the ground. These are each appropriate in responding to truth. Hands raised in realization of the greatness of God, heads bowed in humble recognition, and faces to the ground in fearful reverence. All of our study of God's Word should elicit this type of response in our hearts: understanding, humility, and reverence, recognizing our need for God, His grace, and understanding of His love and greatness.

What is your motivation in hearing God in His Word? What is your posture in listening? Are you active or passive? Do you come here with high expectations or low? Are you motivated to read God's Word consistently, even daily? What's holding you back?

Revival in a View toward Holiness (Neh. 8:9-12)

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is **holy to the Lord your God**; do not mourn or weep." For **all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.** 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. **And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.**" 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make **great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.**

Understanding brought grief

Submitting to God and what is laid out in His Word will inevitably lead to **holiness**, a desire to be obedient in both heart and action. This is not conjured up by external pressure but a dramatic transformation of the heart. We know that when God changes our heart, everything changes: desires, thinking, and actions. It makes sense, then, when the Word was read the people responded in **mourning, weeping, and grief.** At one level this is appropriate. The gospel brings not only new life but a new **awareness** of our sin. Our sin grieves God and falls short of His glory. When we sin, we should bring conviction and tears (James 4:9). Often our problem is that we are not grieved enough over our sin and become too comfortable with it, or we are so calloused and guilt laden we simply try to forget about it, failing to deal with it at all.

Understanding brought joy

But the nature of worship and holiness demands that we **do not stay in a state of grief and mourning.** God is not a God of wrath and holiness alone, He is a God of joy and gladness. He is a God who turns our mourning into dancing (Jer. 31:13) and who lets the bones He's broken rejoice (Ps. 51:8). It was appropriate for the people on a day that was holy to the Lord to "Eat, drink, and rejoice". This came from a true understanding of God and the sacrifices made for them. They could approach God because He made a way to return to Him, to forgive their sin, and accept them based on sacrifices made on their behalf.

This is truly our foundation of joy. Jesus said that He came "**that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.**" (John 15:11). Joy is not optional, minor, or marginal. Our rejoicing comes when we finally understand the TRUTH of the gospel: that God has accepted sinners to Himself through the sacrifice of His Son. Jesus died in our place, rose so that we can be resurrected, and reconciled us to the Father so that we can have a relationship of worship with Him. His joy is our strength. His joy is that He saved His people by Himself, for Himself, to Himself. We are recipients of His love, grace, forgiveness, and sacrifice, even though we earned NONE OF IT. This is the foundation for rejoicing. That is why any type of joy disconnected from understanding the gospel is not real, lasting, or sustainable. Joy is happiness based on the finished work of Christ and the unshakable promises of God.

Have you ever wept over your sin? Has the fact that your sin has been forgiven bring you joy? Is your happiness based on circumstances or unshakable realities that you understand?

Revival in Prioritization (Neh. 8:13-18)

On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe **in order to study the words of the Law.** 14 And they found it written in the Law that

the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths[a] during the feast of the seventh month, 15 and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." 16 So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim.17 And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. **And there was very great rejoicing.** 18 And day by day, from the first day to the last day, **he read from the Book of the Law of God.** They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, **according to the rule.**

Understanding led to Responsibility

After this monumental day of worship, the real work began the next day. Most of the people went home except for the "heads of households", those men who had leadership in each home or clan. They came together for a giant men's Bible study, in order to truly understand the words of the Law. Not only were the people motivated corporately, but leaders of households were passionate to lead, perhaps for the first time. This would culminate in a re-establishment of the festival of booths.

There is no revival without a commitment to God and His Word. It is a vigorous re-establishment of knowing and practice of God's Word that leads to real change. Only God can cause revival in the masses, and we are hopeful that will take place throughout the world. However, we are more interested in revival in each of our homes. How do stale marriages change? How does dry worship find life giving fountains? How do parents with kids out of control find help? The answer to each of these is the same. It is found in a **personal revival in God's Word.** This **starts with an aggressive re-organizing of responsibilities.** Here is what I mean:

All spiritual drift happens in the same way. It does not start with outward, heinous sin but rather in a slow persistent drift. There is a crowding out of most important with the somewhat-important. The busyness of life, doing "good" things (like providing for our family) and involvement with our work and community activities begin to dominate. Reading God's Word, studying it with others, gathering for worship, dedicating time in prayer, or entering into true discipleship relationships get squeezed out by any and all other sorts of sanitized, good things. Soon our appetites for God's Word go away, as does our time and participation in what God has laid out to have a healthy relationship leaves, and we are left with high activity and low relationship. "Church" feels like a nuisance and becomes a margin for anything else to fill, and we strangely no longer "feel" like we are a part. We convince ourselves that we are too "busy" for these things, and we love our kids enough to sacrifice to have them involved in activities that will help them in the future, but that does not include service in the church. Our marriages are not focused, but we can't figure out why because we are working so hard. All the things we are involved in don't satisfy, and we are left wondering why.

Revival starts in the home. Revival starts with us individually. It means saying "no" to the good to say "yes" to what God says is the best. **Prioritization** is the key, since time is NOT THE ISSUE (and never is). We all have the same time resource, so life in Christ comes down to choices with the time we have.

What priority does the Word have in your life? In your family? What priority is the church? Answer these questions not in verbal agreement, but by examining the course of your life, or the time your spend? If I followed your life for a month, what would I see as your greatest **priority, value, and joy.**

Understanding led to Obedience

The leaders of the families saw that they had not been practicing the feast of booths correctly, giving token focus on it but NOT actually living in the booths as required by the Law. They corrected this

practice in full obedience, and this led to **"very great rejoicing"**. They kept the feast and **read from the Book of the Law**.

For some of us, revival will look like getting back to our first love, re-upping our commitment to God and His Word, remembering the sweet communion we used to have with Him. For others, revival is not returning to the good old days, but moving to a place we have never been. There are no shortcuts, but rather a time-tested and proven way to revive our love for God and others: we commit to reading, understanding, and living out the Word of God. So the question that **each of us must answer is this**: Are we in need of revival, and what will it take?