

## Nehemiah 8:1-12

### So, You Want a Revival?

Have you ever prayed for a revival in America? With immorality, corruption, lawlessness and violence filling our TV and computer screens, it's hard even for non-Christians to deny that something is terribly wrong with our society. In spite of our wealth and power, fatherless families, failing schools, and government gridlock, not to mention over 60 million abortions since 1973, all these things testify that the social norms that once provided even the poorest of Americans with a measure of safety and security have simply vanished. Moreover, the ongoing strife in various Christian denominations, from Presbyterians and Methodists wrangling about ordination standards to pedophile Roman Catholic priests abusing thousands of boys, indicates that the Church itself is not exactly in the best of shape. We Americans haven't had a nation-wide revival of the Christian faith since the 1860's, and it shows.

So, what would a wide-scale revival look like? Today's passage gives us an example, and it seems to begin with a genuine and widespread interest in the Word of God. And notice that this is not the same as an interest in religion in general or even religious practices in particular. After all, verse 73 points out that everyone had gathered in the city on the first day of the seventh month, the day the Law of Moses called the Feast of Trumpets. But this wasn't the first time the people of God had observed this day which marked the beginning of the great Fall Festivals. No, the very same words are used in Ezra chapter 3 to describe a similar gathering that had taken place some 93 years earlier, when the first wave of exiles had returned to the Promised Land. On that occasion, all the people had gathered as one man in order to re-establish the system of animal sacrifices prescribed in the Law. And given that they gathered on the same occasion in today's passage, we have no reason to believe that the priests had ceased to make such offerings during the intervening years. Indeed, the very gathering of the people indicates that they knew they were supposed to observe the various prescribed feasts and rituals throughout the year. Yes, it seems that they had been observing the outward forms of religion faithfully for many years – but they were still in need of revival.

In the same way, we should not fall into the error of believing that just coming to worship or receiving the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, or putting money in the offering plate, however good those things may be, are sufficient to spark a true revival of faith among us. No, the presence of true revival seems to be marked by the people's hunger and thirst, not for the forms of religion, but for the Word of God. Notice that verse 1 says that it was all the people who asked Ezra to read the Law of Moses to them. And verse 2 makes plain that this desire was shared by everyone who was old enough to understand the Scriptures, men and women alike. And verse 3 says that they all paid careful attention to the reading from the morning until midday – which probably means between four and six hours. Oh, and they did all this active, intent listening while they were standing in a city plaza.

No, this was no mere ritual exercise, no symbolic public reading, no attempt to use the Bible as some sort of talisman to guarantee divine favor. For Ezra made sure that everyone understood what was being read – the guys on the platform were either taking turns reading, or perhaps facing in different directions so that the crowd of at least 40,000 people could all hear. Moreover, verse 7 says that several Levites were circulating among the crowd, making sure that everyone could understand what the Word meant, either by explaining the context of the passage, or by helping people who found the Hebrew language difficult.

In short, what was happening in chapter 8 is the same sort of thing I like to think has been happening every Sunday morning for years in many congregations all over America – a clear explanation of part of God’s Word. Indeed, Ezra had probably been doing this same sort of teaching for the 13 years he had been in Judea. So it wasn’t the reading of God’s Word that was new in this passage: it was the intense interest the people had in hearing the Scriptures – that’s what marked this as part of a real revival. All the people, men and women, even the boys and girls old enough to know what was going on, were willing to stand up for several hours, listening attentively to make sure they really understand what the Bible had to say to them.

Well, what about us? After all, we don’t have to go through all this sort of trouble, standing in the street for hours, straining to hear the Word of God. After all, since the invention of the printing press, the Bible continues to be the all-time best-selling book of all time, with over 5 billion copies sold. I would venture to guess that all of us have a copy – probably more than one – on our shelves. And now with the advent of the internet, you can even get a free copy of the Bible on your phone. And some of these apps will even do for you what Ezra did for the people in today’s passage – read the Bible aloud to you in your translation of choice.

But how interested are we in digging into the Scriptures? And no, this isn’t a question about our spiritual disciplines, how regular our practice of daily Bible reading should be. No, this is a question of desire – like the people in today’s passage, do we long for more of the Word of God? Do we choose to read the Bible instead of all the other distractions and amusements available to us? We remember that when He was faced with the temptation to break a fast prematurely, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 – “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” How many of us would even be willing to skip lunch in order to hear more of the Word of God? And if we don’t have this kind of desire, do we really want a revival? For that’s the sort of reordering of priorities that true revival brings.

But there’s something else that always goes along with true revival – not only a genuine and widespread interest in the Word of God, but a genuine and heartfelt conviction of sin in the hearts of those who hear it. That certainly happened in today’s passage, didn’t it? The end of verse 9 tells us that all the people were weeping when they heard what the Law of Moses had to say. Now, again, given the fact that Ezra had been teaching the Bible for 13 years, we shouldn’t imagine that this was the first time these people had heard different bits and pieces of God’s law. Many of them probably could have recited the Ten Commandments, just as many of us have been able to do from the time we were children in Sunday School. So they probably weren’t sorrowful because they were gaining new information. Instead, what is more likely is that the Holy Spirit brought them a clearer conviction of how they had failed to live up to the law, a deeper sense of the seriousness of their sin. In short, the revival produced more a change in their hearts than a change in their thinking.

And this wasn’t just an Old Testament phenomenon. No, when Peter preached his great sermon on the Day of Pentecost, part of which we read responsively this morning, he didn’t tell the people of Jerusalem much that they didn’t already know. They knew Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah – that’s why they had turned on Him. And they probably knew the passage from Joel that Peter quoted as well. No, what was different was their reaction: when Peter presented the claims of Christ to them, this time they were cut to the heart. The same voices that had called Jesus a blasphemer and cried for Him to be crucified now called out to Peter, “What must we do to be saved?”

That's what happens during a revival. People not only desire to know what God's Word says – they are also willing in a deeper way to apply it to their hearts and lives. They are willing to look deeply into the mirror of Scripture to see who they really are. They are willing for the light of God's Word to shine into every crevice of their hearts, revealing every thought and word, every deed and habit that isn't in accordance with God's will, destroying every trace of self-deception, driving away any delusion that any of us are basically good in and of ourselves. In short, in a true revival, greater knowledge of the Word always leads to clearer understanding of our own sin. Do we really want that? Do we want to be shaken out of our complacency and confronted with a need for radical change? And if not, do we really want a revival?

But there's one more thing that a revival also brings, and that lies behind the rather strange admonition we find in verse 9. For when the people had heard the Word of God with interest, and when they had been genuinely convicted of their sins, they quite naturally wept over those sins. And yet Nehemiah and Ezra and all the leaders told them not to do that, not to go on mourning and weeping. Why in the world would they say that?

We Presbyterians might be tempted to think this is simply a matter of preserving decency and order – keeping people from becoming overly emotional about their sins in public. But that can't be right. No, we see an extended corporate confession and repentance taking place just a few weeks later, as described in chapter 9. No, there's nothing inherently wrong with public confession and sorrow for sin.

We might be closer to the truth if we think about the cycle of feasts and fasts prescribed by the Law of Moses – after all, the Day of Atonement, the day for the people to mourn their sins, was scheduled for the following week. This passage takes place on the Feast of Trumpets, a celebration of the new liturgical year.

But why did God arrange things that way? Why would God want His people to celebrate His provision for them before they mourned their sins? And why, in the second half of this chapter, would Nehemiah insist on recording how the people kept the great fall celebration, the Feast of Tabernacles, before recounting the great confession of the people in chapter 9? Wasn't the day of Atonement supposed to come before the Feast of Tabernacles? What's going on here?

Well, let's think about what has occurred in the story up to this point. The people of God have been stirred into action by Nehemiah and his vision of restoring the walls of the city of Jerusalem. Moreover, they have accomplished this seemingly impossible task in only six months – and chapter six leads us to believe that the actual construction only took 52 days. They had accomplished great things – so the danger was for them to look at God's Law and get just as busy about trying to make themselves acceptable to God by keeping it. The danger was for their sorrow for sin to degenerate into fear of punishment, and then into a legalistic attempt to save themselves through good works.

In the same way, we have to be careful in starting our understanding of God with His Law. For on the one hand, it's too easy for us to dumb down the Law, constructing a simplified list of dos and don'ts and then congratulating ourselves on how righteous we think we are. On the other hand, if we take an honest look at ourselves in the mirror of the Scriptures, if we are genuinely convicted of our sins, it's far too easy to ask what we have to do to save ourselves, what rituals we need to observe, what sacrifices we need to make, what behaviors we need to change in order to get right with God. In short,

it's too easy for our guilt and fear to transform the gospel into legalism – things done or things left undone.

But that's why God didn't bring His people to Mt. Sinai and give them His Law until after He had saved them from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. In fact, the Ten Commandments themselves begin not with a directive, but with a reminder of this fact: "I am the Lord your God Who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." For God's people, the promise of God's presence and the grace of God's salvation always comes before our response of obedient good works.

In the same way, Nehemiah and Ezra didn't want the people to start out by dwelling on their sins and what they needed to do about them. That would come later, but for now they wanted the people simply to reflect on how God had been so gracious to them, how He had brought them back to the Promised Land after their exile, and how He had overcome all the overwhelming obstacles they faced, allowing them to complete the wall-building project so quickly. In short, they wanted the joy of the Lord's salvation and provision to come before the people's necessary response of confession and repentance.

And the reason for that is stated so clearly, if so succinctly, in verse 10: the joy of the Lord is your strength. For that's the third great thing that all revivals have in common. For if they bring a new focus on the Word of God, and if they bring a deeper awareness of our sins, they always bring a renewed focus on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Whenever the Holy Spirit grips the hearts of God's people, there is always a deep understanding of how much God loves us, how great a sacrifice God has made for us. And it is the certainty of that love, the joy of knowing that we have been forgiven and freed – that's what fuels our faith in God, that's what drives our passion for the Scriptures, that's what drives us to root out whatever sin we discover in our lives. It's a joy that comes from God, a joy that springs from the certainty of His love, it is that sort of deep, abiding joy that is our strength, our refuge, our hiding place, our firm foundation for Christian living. Who wouldn't want to be filled with God's Spirit, to experience such joy?

But remember, revival is a package deal. The closeness to God that produces such joy necessarily transforms all our priorities. The indwelling of the Spirit that convinces us so clearly of God's love also gives us an intense desire for God's word, and a ruthless determination to purge sin from our lives. Just as we see in today's passage, revival changes everything. It's certainly what we need. But is it really what we want?