

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision**

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

## **When the Winds of Revival Blow**

(Nehemiah 8:1-17)

Study #11

### **Introduction: Revive us, again...**

A book I keep in my library<sup>1</sup> defines a “revival” as *“a season in which God works in a sovereign way on behalf of His people.”*

Thankfully, there have been lots of these seasons when God has sent revivals that have renewed, refreshed and re-energized His people to lead God-honoring lives.

People who study these things tell us that there are predictable patterns in place in the churches when revival falls. We’ll notice a couple of these this morning.

But, when thinking about revival, the key thing to realize is that, while people are revived, God does the reviving. A church can schedule a series of meetings, but it can’t schedule a revival. Revivals are, by definition, scheduled by God. Not by us.

There have been occasions when God has sent revivals to our own land.

In the 1740’s, what is referred to as “The First Great Awakening” swept New England. Read stories about this season and you’ll be amazed at the dramatic changes that occurred in the lives of

many people living in colonial America, in many churches, and in society at large.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say that the changes were universal. All Christians were not revived, nor were all churches. Some aspects of society were unchanged. For instance, slavery continued, unabated, during and after the revival. But, this Awakening did bring about substantial changes.

During “The Second Great Awakening”, revival fires burned in Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Ohio through the early 1800’s.<sup>3</sup>

Then, there was the Layman’s Prayer Revival. It started in New York City in 1858, and tens of thousands of Christians were spiritually renewed. During the height of this revival, the city’s business district would close during the lunch hour because everybody was praying.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, revival swept through sections of New England, south as far as Georgia, and then west to California.

And there have been others. There was the Welsh Revival<sup>5</sup> of 1904, the Jesus Movement of the 60’s and 70’s, along with the current stirrings in Central America, in the Far East, even in the Middle East.

Something stirs when we hear about these movements of God, in different eras and in different places. We hunger for the same. We want to see God move among us, convict us of sin and lead us into holiness, energize us to serve and to love and to obey.

Revival is what we long for, and we all too rarely dare to express our longing for it. Today, as we look to the book of Nehemiah, we see the beginnings of a remarkable biblical revival. And we’re daring to dream.

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<sup>2</sup> Key influencers were George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards

<sup>3</sup> A leading light of this revival was Charles F. Finney and it spread to Chicago, Louisville, Cleveland, and to St. Louis.

<sup>4</sup> A key figure was Jeremiah Lamphier.

<sup>5</sup> The Welsh Revival was actually the predecessor to the awakenings of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in America. A key figure was Evan Roberts of Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> Baker’s Dictionary of Theology.

Following fifty-two days of wall-building, the Jerusalem construction project wrapped up late in a hot Palestinian summer.

With that work done, the way was cleared for the second phase of the work to begin. Phase Two - spiritual revitalization - commenced at the beginning of the seventh month (Tishri, corresponding to our September/October), at a specific place in Jerusalem, a place near the southern sector of the city, the Water Gate.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Bible Is God's Word - Pay Rapt Attention to It! (vv. 1-8)**

#### **United in a Hunger for God's Word (v. 1)**

***[1a] And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate...***

There were likely thousands of people gathered together, but they have gathered in unity, ***“as one.”***

It's a powerful thing when a group of whatever size gathers ***“as one”*** for God's sake.

I'm praying that our teens who are leaving in just seven days for the Evangelical Free Church Challenge Conference will have exactly this experience in Kansas City - the three-dozen going from our church and the thousands who will attend Challenge.

Maybe you've had that experience of a big-crowd-unity before at a large gathering. But it can also happen in a small-group or around a dinner table.

It's happened here at Northwest when we've been hungry for God, eager for Him and attentive to Him, desperate for Him to move.

That is the atmosphere of the gathering in Nehemiah 8. It is both reverent and electric at the same time.

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<sup>6</sup> A preview to chapters 8 and 9 will show that they deal with spiritual revival. Chapters 10-12 deal with the results of genuine revival. So, a basic summary of the book would be: 1-6 deal with building and 7-13 deal with builders.

And, with the people all gathered at the Water Gate, we are introduced to one of my favorite Bible characters: Ezra.<sup>7</sup>

Ezra was a scribe and a priest who ***[Ezra 7:10] had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.***

About fifteen years before Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, this Ezra had led a group of five thousand Jews back from Babylon/Persia. He went back with the self-appointed task to restore right worship to the city.

That being the case, you can bet that he was thrilled with the people's request.

***[1b]...they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel.***

Biblical prophecy is intriguing, poetry is beautiful, and history is interesting. But the people asked for the part of the Bible called Law.

They wanted the part of the Old Testament that gave commands, prohibitions, and instructions about how to live God's way.

#### **Listening to God by Listening to His Word (vv. 2-5)**

*People with an appetite for God! (v. 2)*

***[2] Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.<sup>8</sup>***

The seventh month - Tishri - is the holy month for the Jews. Included in this month is Rosh Hashanah (the civic New Year; literally

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<sup>7</sup> Together, Ezra and Nehemiah teamed to restore Jerusalem to its God-ordained place in the world as a light for Him. Nehemiah focused his efforts on political, military, and economic reform, while Ezra's focus was on the overtly spiritual.

<sup>8</sup> In the Jewish sacred calendar, Tishri was the 7th month. In the civic calendar, it was called the first month. Tishri is approximately equivalent to our September.

“the head of the year”), the Day of Atonement<sup>9</sup> and the week-long Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>10</sup>

Here, on New Year’s Day (Rosh Hashanah), the people have gathered to Ezra (they were called together by Nehemiah - 7:5) to hear Scripture read.

They are hungry for God’s truth.<sup>11</sup>

Speaking from a raised platform, “Chef Ezra” lays out the meal as the people listened and listened and listened.

*The setting for the “meal” (vv. 3-5)*

***[3] He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. [4] Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which 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] Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.***

The people will stand there for perhaps as long as six solid hours, attentive, taking in the words of the Law the way a starving man gobbles up food.

Before he began reading, though, Ezra called this worship service to order.

### **A Righteous Worship Service (vv. 6-8)**

<sup>9</sup> Observed on the tenth day of the month.

<sup>10</sup> Celebrated from the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the month.

<sup>11</sup> Remember, this is mid-September in Palestine, and the weather in Palestine is much like the weather of South Texas. What is the weather often like in mid-September in South Texas? HOT!

*All hearts turn in worship to God (v. 6)*

***[6] Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.***

The people are eager to gain exposure to the Word of God. It’s been a while since they’ve heard it.

And Ezra starts reading. As he reads, Nehemiah draws our attention to another group of men, separate from the first group.

*Teachers explain (translate) the Law! (vv. 7-8)*

***[7] Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. [8] They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.***

These thirteen men are not standing on the podium with Ezra. They are dispersed among the crowd, bi-lingual Bible teachers.

And why were these guys and their services necessary?

Because, while Ezra was reading out loud in Hebrew, most of these Jews no longer spoke Hebrew.

After one hundred and forty years of captivity by Babylonians and Persians, they spoke Babylonian, or Persian or Aramaic.<sup>12</sup>

So, Ezra would read for a bit. Then each of the translators would render it into the common language for the people standing near them so that everybody could understand.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> By and large, the Jews in Nehemiah’s Palestine spoke Aramaic.

<sup>13</sup> These people were a people of the Book. God’s people have always been people of the Book. We treasure the Bible because it is the Word of God to us - true in 445 BC and in AD 2018. If this morning you hunger for truth, spiritual growth and for

The people have been exposed to God's Word. What response do they give? Sheer joy? Exuberance? Listen.

### **The Bible Brings Conviction - Yield to It! (vv. 9-12)**

#### **Good Grief (v. 9)**

***[9] Then 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 were weeping when they heard the words of the law.***

The first taste of the meal of God's Word to these folks was not sweet. No, the words Ezra read were a bitter pill to swallow.<sup>14</sup>

This day - Rosh Hashanah - was to be a holy-day (holiday) of feasting, celebration, and rejoicing. Deuteronomy commands all of that.

Instead, though, the people were weeping. Why?

Well, think about what they have heard.

For hours they had listened to Scripture: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

They heard the stories of creation, fall, flood, and Babel. They heard of God's choice of Abraham and the patriarchs, of God's salvation of Israel at the Exodus.

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God, the meal He has provided to satisfy that appetite is found between the covers of your Bible. He has spoken to us in His Word. Run to it.

<sup>14</sup> For other passages that speak of Scripture as "food" see Revelation 10:8-10 (where a book given to the Apostle John by an angel that is sweet in his mouth and bitter in his stomach); a similar passage in Ezekiel 2; 1 Peter 2, where Christians are told, *[2] like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...*"; and, from Jesus, *[Matthew 4:4] "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God..."*

Then, they heard the Ten Commandments, the ins and outs of the sacrificial system, and the Law's moral requirements.

They heard all the *shoulds* and the *should nots* and realize that they had not done the *shoulds* and that they had done most of the *should nots*.

They were convicted of their sin and they grieved because of their guilt before God. And they knew their guilt because the Bible told them so.

There is a certain teaching you will hear from time to time in Christian circles.

This teaching is that Christians should never feel guilty. *"We are forgiven. Therefore, all feelings of guilt are from the devil."*

Now, it is certainly true that the devil is behind a lot of guilty feelings people have. He wants us to feel guilty and to be ashamed of who we are - and there is nothing wrong with who you are.

But, bad feelings over disobedience to God's commands are not from the devil. They are from the Lord.

It is the Holy Spirit's gracious work to prick our consciences and to prompt feelings of remorse and guilt when we have sinned.

I thank God for the guilty feelings that arise after I sin. They remind me that I have strayed.

When I am convicted by the Holy Spirit about my sin, I can flee in the opposite direction - obedience - and can once again experience intimacy with my God.

That, in a word, is repentance. And, as the Apostle Paul will later write, it is truly the kindness of God that leads anyone, ever, to repentance. (Romans 2:4)

God did not give the revelation of His will in the Bible so that we would feel badly when we disobey. He gave commands so that we

would know when we have rebelled, and then, knowing, would turn, change, and do what He wants us to do.

And what God wanted the Jews to do who were standing around weeping, guilt-ridden over their sin, was to party hearty.

### **An Obedient Celebration (vv. 10-12)**

***[10a] Then he<sup>15</sup> said to them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord.***

So, yes, it was a good thing that they experienced emotional pain because of their sin. But, there was a danger in that.

The danger was that they might dwell on their sin to such an extent that they would never get around to turning from the sin that had led to the grief-filled conviction in the first place.

To prevent that from happening, Ezra told these Jews to **obey the Bible** and celebrate Rosh Hashanah with rejoicing **WHETHER THEY FELT LIKE IT OR NOT!**

Now, maybe you want to come to the Jews’ defense. I get it.

How could Nehemiah expect them to throw a party when they were feeling badly? Well, by this command we learn something very important about our life with God.

When Ezra told the people, ***[10b]...Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*** (or, perhaps better, “*your strength will come as you rejoice in the Lord*”) he was telling them that if they wanted spiritual strength, they would have to rejoice - just like God told them to do in the Law.

How counter-intuitive.

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<sup>15</sup> Ezra? Nehemiah? Both?

We are tempted to think that when we need strength from God for a certain task, we should:

- first, pray for power;
- second, wait for God to fill us with that power;
- third, obey.

Nehemiah 8:10 turns that order on its head.

Certainly, when we are challenged to obey God in a hard thing, we first turn to Him in prayer.

But the second step is NOT to wait for Him to fill us with power. Step two is to obey - because it is in the act of obedience that God will supply the strength we need.

The Jews in Jerusalem may have thought that holding a festival was impossible, given their emotional state.

But they did it. They set to work fixing big meals, sending out invitations to friends and family - doing the exact opposite of what they felt like doing.

But then, in the celebrating, they experienced God’s strength.

It is the same for you and me. In the moment of obeying, we may feel like we are in an emotional free-fall. When we walk in obedience to the Word of God into something really tough, it may feel as if we have stepped off a cliff.

It is at this point we know that if God doesn’t come through for us, we are sunk - and power comes as we obey the Word of God.

Watch the Apostle Peter out on the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus is standing in front of Him, on the waves. Peter wanted to go out to where Jesus was, so he said, ***[Matthew 14:28]...“Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”***

Jesus’ command, ***“Come!”*** empowered Peter to walk on water.

When the command comes to you and me - and it comes as we listen to the Word of God - it comes with the Spirit’s power.

But, God doesn't often empower us in advance of taking that step of obedience. He empowers us AS we take that step of courageous obedience so that our obedience is based on FAITH.

The Jews were to find spiritual strength by celebrating a feast to the Lord - the very thing they felt least like doing, but the very thing required of them by the Law.

Where will we find spiritual strength? Not as we wait for it. We will find God's strength as we obey God's commands. His strength is released as we step on the gas and accelerate into obedience.

- Don't feel like loving your spouse? Love your spouse.
- Feel tempted to walk into an immoral situation? Walk into holiness.
- Feel like clinging to your money when there is a need you could meet staring you in the face? Loosen your purse strings.
- Feel like holding a grudge even after the person who wronged you has asked forgiveness? Forgive, and unleash God's strength.

Feeling terrible for their centuries of rebellion, the Jews of Nehemiah's day did as they had been commanded and found out just how true it is that ***"the joy of the Lord WAS their strength."***

***[11] So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved."***

***[12] All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.***

So far, we've seen the Jews give long-overdue attention to the Bible and show a willingness to obey in response to the Spirit's conviction.

There is one more thing to see this morning from the revival of Nehemiah 8. We see it as we watch the people come back to the Water Gate on the second day of the month Tishri.

**The Bible Contains God's Commands - Obey Them! (vv. 13-18)**

**Exposure to God's Word Leads to Increased Insight (vv. 13-14)**

*Gathering - to receive insight... (v. 13)*

***[13] Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.***

They are still hungry. One experience of conviction that led to repentance and joy wasn't enough. They were coming back for more.

And they are seeking *insight*. Insight is not the same thing as knowledge.

Knowledge in any realm of endeavor - engineering, math, science, history, mechanics, computers, homemaking - is good to have.

Bible knowledge is a good thing to have, too. But Bible knowledge is a lousy end, by itself. Knowledge of the Bible's facts and figures is always a means to an end.<sup>16</sup>

When we sit down to learn God's Word, we do it with a view to gaining insight. And insight is knowledge that leads to action.

That's what the Jews of Nehemiah's Jerusalem were after when they gathered, again, to listen to Ezra read the Bible.

*God wants us to live in tents? (v. 14)*

***[14] They found written in the law how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.***

The major Jewish feast of the seventh month is the Feast of Ingathering (or Tabernacles/Booths/Succoth). It was a festival observed five days after the Day of Atonement. This week-long feast was characterized by joyous festivities, distinctive sacrifices, and, most notably, living in tents, or *booths*.

<sup>16</sup> A vast knowledge of Bible facts does not guarantee godliness. Some of the most biblically literate pastors and most astute Bible scholars go astray. Seminaries, which are bastions of Bible knowledge, may succumb to heresy.

That's right, the Jews really were all supposed to live in tents for a solid week out of every year during the feast of Tabernacles.<sup>17</sup> Why tents?

It was to remind them of the forty years their ancestors spent in tents wandering in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

They were to live in tents to nurture a grateful spirit for what God had done for them in the past *and* for the stable conditions He had provided for them now that they were living in the land of Palestine.

Because they have listened to Ezra read the Bible, they now have insight into what God required of them.

Knowledge would have told them that their ancestors lived in tents. Knowledge would have told them that the Law commanded that all Jews were to live in tents during the Feast of Ingathering.

Insight leads to opportunities for obedience. INSIGHT says, "*We will live in tents.*"

### **Insight Leads to More Opportunities for Obedience (vv. 15-18)**

*God says to make tents? OK - so we make tents! (vv. 15-17a)*

***[15] So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of 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. [17a] The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them.***

An amazing transformation occurred in Jerusalem because the people paid attention to God's Word. For one glorious week the city of Jerusalem became a tent city.

The people saw from Scripture what they were supposed to do - and they did it. They put their new insight to work and obeyed God.

And this is shocking. They observed the Feast of Tabernacles the way God had told them to observe it back in the Law - for the first time in a thousand years.

*The fruit of a Bible-full faith! (v. 17b)*

***[17b]...The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day.***

Not that the Feast had not been celebrated at all for a millennium. Ezra would have made sure that the people observed it a few years earlier when he first arrived in Jerusalem.

But they didn't live in tents. Nor had the people lived in tents for a week during the days of King David or Solomon or Hezekiah or Josiah.

Why do you suppose they had neglected to live in tents for a millennium?

Ignorance? Apathy? An unwillingness to be inconvenienced for a week?

It really doesn't matter, though, because, regardless of the reason, on this day one thousand years of negligent disobedience was undone - just like that - ***[17c]...And there was great rejoicing!***

They read the Law's command to live in tents on the second day of Tishri. Thirteen days later, they're living in tents.

I think that the gift of this part of the Jews' story to us is HOPE.

<sup>17</sup> The tents/booths were to be constructed out of branches of trees and shrubs and had to have at least three walls made out of the branches. The feast began on the 15th of the month Tishri.

Any of us may have patterns of rebellion or neglect or apathy that have been present in our lives for a while. None of them have been in place for a millennium.

So, we've seen this before in Nehemiah, and here it is again.

Once we learn His will and submit to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, it need not take a long time to turn something around.

Do you despair of ever taking next steps in your walk with God? Are you stuck - and afraid that your stuck-ness is permanent?

Here's the truth. You can know the joy that comes from obedience to God today as you take the insight you gain from your exposure to God's word and obey.

### **Conclusion:**

At the beginning this morning, I told you about some of the wonderful seasons of revival with which God had blessed His people through the centuries.

Revivals are not scheduled. They are the sovereign work of God, seasons during which He renews, refreshes and re-energizes His people for worship and service.

That said, generally speaking, revival comes when we come to the end of ourselves, recognize our need for what God alone can provide, and give undivided, serious, submissive attention to His Word.

Father. Hear our prayer. Revive us. Revive us, again.