

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 2, 2008)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### SERMON SERIES: Forward! Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

## **The Winds of Revival**

(Nehemiah 8:1-17)

Study #11

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

From time to time, through the Christian centuries, God has visited His people with revival.

According to Baker's Dictionary of Theology, "*revival is God working in a sovereign way on behalf of His people.*" A time of revival is a season during which God sovereignly works to **renew**, **refresh** and **re-energize** Christians.

Now revival is not the same thing as evangelism. Evangelism is all about God's people spreading the Good News that Jesus saves. By contrast, revival is something God does.

Nor is revival something that can be scheduled, as in, "*We're holding a revival next week.*"<sup>1</sup> Genuine revival is scheduled by God, not by us.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Dictionary continues. "No human being can kindle the interest, quicken the conscience, or generate that intensity of spiritual hunger that signifies revival. All spiritual life, whether in the individual or in the community, in the church or in the nation, is by the Spirit of God. No man can schedule a revival ... But when darkness deepens, when moral declension reaches its lowest ebb, when the church becomes cold ... and the prayer ascends from a few earnest hearts ... then history teaches it is time for the tide of revival to sweep in once more. The Dictionary article concludes - "Revival always involves the preaching of divine judgment, confession of sin, repentance, acceptance of salvation as a free gift, the authority of

On more than a few occasions, the United States has enjoyed seasons of revival.

In the 1740's the First Great Awakening swept New England. Read about it and you'll be amazed at the dramatic changes that occurred in the lives of the **majority** of the citizens living in colonial America at that time, in the society as a whole, and in the churches.<sup>2</sup>

Revival fires burned across our nation's frontier region around the year 1800 and for several decades afterward in Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Ohio. This revival is referred to as the Second Great Awakening.<sup>3</sup>

The Layman's Prayer Revival of 1858, which started in New York City, saw tens of thousands of Christians renewed in their spiritual lives and tens of thousands more converted.<sup>4</sup> (At times during this revival New York City's business district closed down during the lunch hour for prayer.) That revival spread to Chicago, Louisville, Cleveland, and St. Louis.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, widespread revival swept through Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Scranton, Pennsylvania, Schenectady, Troy, and New York City, New York, Danbury Connecticut, Boston, Massachusetts, Forest City, Maine, Rutland, Vermont, Atlanta, Georgia - and then westward to California.

And beyond these major movements of God's Spirit there have been countless other awakenings: The Welsh Revival<sup>5</sup> of 1904, the Jesus Movement of the 60's and 70's in America and the current stirrings in Central America, and elsewhere around the world.

When we hear about these movements of the Spirit of God, we can't help but hunger for the same. And this hunger for revival is a good thing.

---

the Scriptures and the joy and discipline of the Christian life. While revivals do not last, the effects of revival always endure."

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

<sup>3</sup> A leading light of this revival was Charles F. Finney.

<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.

Who among us doesn't long to see God's power unleashed in our day? Wouldn't every last one of us rejoice to see His Spirit convicting believers of sin and leading us all into holiness, purging our society of evil, and bringing families together under the banner of the cross?

Of course we would. Revival is what we long for - and we too infrequently dare to express our longing for it.

The Bible records a few true, blue revivals. And today, we are privileged to see one of the more remarkable of them. We find it in the book of Nehemiah.

Following fifty two days of labor, the Jerusalem wall-rebuilding project wrapped up late in the summer. With that work done, the way was cleared for the second phase of the work to begin.

Nehemiah tells us that Phase Two - spiritual revitalization - commenced at the beginning of the seventh month (Tishri), at a specific place in Jerusalem, a place near the southern end of the city, the Water Gate.

**The Bible Is God's Word - We Should Seek It and Pay Rapt Attention to it! (vv. 1-8)**

**Crying for a Word from God! (v. 1)**

*[1] And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel.*

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

Our teens who have attended the bi-ennial Free Church summer “Challenge” conferences have experienced that kind of unity. Thousands of teenagers gathered for spiritual renewal.

Men who have been to a Promise Keepers event and women who have attended a Women of Faith conference have tasted it, too.

At times, we here at Northwest have experienced it. All of us hungry for God. All of us eager and attentive to Him. All of us desperate for Him to move. (Might today be one of those days?)

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

And, with the people all gathered at the Water Gate, we are introduced to one of my personal Bible heroes: Ezra.

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

He had led a contingent of five thousand Jews back to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity some fifteen years prior to Nehemiah's arrival,<sup>6</sup> with the self-appointed task of restoring right worship to the city.

That being the case, you can bet that he was thrilled with the people's petition. They asked him to bring them the Bible - in fact, a particular portion of the Jewish Bible.

They asked for the part of the Old Testament called Law. Prophecy is intriguing. Poetry is beautiful. History is interesting. But the people weren't asking for those portions of Scripture. They wanted God's Law.

They wanted to know what God required of them and Law gave them the clear pathway to obedience.

**Attention! God is Speaking Through 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>7</sup>*

---

<sup>6</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.

The seventh month is the month of holy days for the Jews. Included in this month is Rosh Hashanah<sup>8</sup>, the Day of Atonement<sup>9</sup> and the week long Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>10</sup>

On Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the civic year, the people have gathered to hear the Scripture read. They are hungry for God's truth. Speaking from a raised platform and flanked by civic leaders, "Chef Ezra" lays out the meal.

Out of reverence for God and for His Word, the people stood and listened - and they listened and listened and listened.<sup>11</sup>

*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, Hilkiyah, 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.***

Perhaps for as long as six solid hours, the people stood, attentive, completely absorbed in what they were hearing.

They were taking in the words of the Law the way a starving person gobbles up food. Consuming it, feasting on it, devouring it, ingesting it.

---

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

<sup>8</sup> The beginning of the civic year observed on the first two days of the month.

<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!

They knew that as they listened to the words of the Law, they were listening to God's words - and they couldn't get enough of it!

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

*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.***

Overcome by this exposure to the Word of God, the people of God responded to what they were hearing with physical gestures - standing up, raising hands, shouting "AMEN," and then bowing with faces to the ground.

Nehemiah draws our attention now to another group of men, separate and different from the first group listed.

*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 men are not standing on the podium with Ezra. They are dispersed throughout the crowd. They are bi-lingual Bible teachers.

And why were these guys and their services necessary?

Well, when Ezra read from the Law, he would have read from the original Hebrew. But most of the Jews present no longer spoke Hebrew. After one hundred and forty years of domination by Babylonians and Persians, they spoke Babylonian, or Persian or (more likely) Aramaic.<sup>12</sup>

Ezra would read for a bit. Then the men (v. 7) would give a translation and explanation to the people standing near them.

---

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

These people were people of the Book. God's people have always been people of the Book. Believers have always treasured the Bible, because they have seen that it is the Word of God to them.

And what was true for the Jews of Jerusalem in 445 BC is true for us, here, in 2008. We have a treasure in this book.

Friends, if this morning you hunger for truth, for righteousness, for spiritual growth, for God - the meal that He has provided to quench your thirst and to satisfy that appetite is found between the covers of your Bible! He has spoken to us in His Word. Run to it!

Now that the people have been exposed to God's Word, what response would you expect? Sheer joy? Exuberance? Listen.

**The Bible Brings Conviction - We are to 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. In fact, the words of Scripture were a bitter pill to swallow.

This day - the Rosh Hashanah - was to be a holy day of feasting, celebration, and rejoicing in Israel. Instead, the people were weeping and mourning. Why?

Well, they had heard the words of God from the Law. For hours they had listened to God's Word - some of them perhaps hearing Scripture for the very first time - as it was read to them from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

They heard the stories of creation, of God's choice of Abraham, the faith and apostasy of the patriarchs, God's sovereign protection of the nation, and His salvation of Israel through the Exodus.

Then, they heard the Ten Commandments, the ins and outs of the sacrificial system, the Law's moral requirements, the ethical demands of God. They heard all the *should's* and the *should not's*. As they heard command after command, they became aware that they had not done the *should's* and that they had committed the *should not's*. They were convicted of **SIN**. They saw how badly they had dropped the ball of obedience.

They were grieving because they were convicted of their guilt before God. How did they know their guilt? The Bible told them so!

There is a certain teaching you will hear from time to time about guilt. The teaching says that Christians should never feel guilty. "*We are forgiven. Therefore, all feelings of guilt are from the devil.*"

Now I certainly believe that the devil is behind a lot of the guilty feelings that people have. He is definitely the one who wants us to feel guilty and ashamed about who we are. There is truly nothing wrong with who you, a child of God, ARE.

But, bad feelings over violations of the commands and prohibitions found in God's Word are not from the devil. They are from the Lord!

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

Thank God for the guilty feelings that arise after you have lied, or given vent to an outburst of anger or have sinned sexually! It is that sensation of having offended a holy God (who is also your Father) - guilt! - that prompts the proper response to guilt: REPENTANCE.

Convicted by the Holy Spirit of God over misbehavior, what do we do? We flee in the opposite direction - obedience - to experience intimacy with our Father again and the joy of walking in the light.

In Jerusalem, the Jews' grief was necessary and good - for a time. But, very shortly, grief needs to morph into REPENTANCE.

After all, God did not provide the revelation of His moral will so that His people would feel badly when they disobeyed. He provided plain revelation so that we would do what He wants us to do.

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

### **Celebration Grows Out of Understanding! (vv. 10-12)**

*[10] Then he 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. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your 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.*

Fascinating...

It was a good thing that they experienced emotional pain because of their sin. But, there was a danger. And the danger was that they might dwell on their sin to such an extent that they never got around to correcting the disobedience that had led to the grief-producing conviction in the first place!

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

Now, it may be that you want to come to the Jews' defense.

How could they be expected to celebrate a festival when they were feeling badly? Well, by this command God is telling us something very important about our life with God.

When Ezra told the people, *“The joy of the Lord is your strength”* he was letting them know that if they wanted spiritual strength, they would have to rejoice and throw a party - just like God told them to do in the Law.

How counter-intuitive! We think that when we need strength from God for a certain task, we should follow this procedure: First, pray for power; second, wait for God to fill us with that power; Third, obey.

What we read in Nehemiah 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. However, 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 probably thought that holding a festival was inappropriate, maybe even impossible, given their emotional state. When they began throwing the party, they may have been doing the exact opposite of what they felt like doing. But in the celebration, they experienced the power of God!

So for us, 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 a dangerous or difficult act, it may seem 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!

But power comes when we act in obedience to the Word of God. The apostle Peter knew that truth well. That's why, from the boat, he said to Jesus, *[Matthew 14:28]... “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”*

Jesus said, *“Come”* - and that command empowered Peter to walk on water!

When the command comes to you and me - and it comes as we read/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 you and I find spiritual strength? Not as we wait for it. We will find God's strength as we rush to the wall to serve Jesus!

Every Christian has a full gas tank of God's strength! We each have at our disposal all the power for living we could ever need!

But, that strength is only released in our lives as we step on the gas pedal, and accelerate into the life of obedience to the Word of God.

So, what have we seen so far this morning?

- First, we have seen that the Bible is God's special revelation of His will to us - so we should seek it out.
- Second, we have seen that when we discover a pattern of disobedience to Scripture in our lives, we should correct that pattern, whether we feel like it or not, because in our turning we will find God's strength.

But there is one more thing we need to see today. The people come back to the Water Gate to hear more of God's Word on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

### **The Bible Contains God's Commands - We Should Obey It! (vv. 13-18)**

#### **Increased 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 for God's Word. One experience of conviction that led to repentance and joy wasn't enough. They were coming back for more. And notice what they were seeking. They are seeking to gain *insight*. *Insight* is knowledge that leads to action.

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

With respect to Scripture, it is helpful to KNOW Bible facts. It comes in really handy when playing Bible trivia and it is so embarrassing to not be able to turn to Habakkuk quickly in a home Bible study.

BUT, when we come to the Bible, we come to it for something very different than the accumulation of knowledge. We come to it because in Scripture we hear God's voice. It is in hearing that voice that our lives are changed.

When we sit down to read (hear) God's Word, we do it with a view to gaining life-changing insight! That's what the Jews of Nehemiah's Jerusalem were after when they came on Day Two of Rosh Hashanah to listen to Ezra read the Bible.

And in tracing what happened there, we discover that when we run to Scripture to receive insight, insight is what we receive.

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

***[14] They found written in the law<sup>13</sup> how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.***

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

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>14</sup> Why tents?

It was to remind them of their heritage in the wilderness, when they spent forty years wandering around en route to the Promised Land.

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

---

<sup>13</sup> Maybe Ezra had just finished reading Leviticus 23, which describes this Feast. If not that, then in some way they were informed or reminded of the section of Scripture that dealt with the Feast of Tabernacles, while they were listening to the exposition of the Word.

<sup>14</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.

And because they have turned to Scripture, because they have listened to the Word as it was read by Ezra (and interpreted by the translators) the Jews of Jerusalem came to understand a bit more of what God required of them. That's INSIGHT.

Here's a promise: If you and I will give ourselves to the Word, we will gain insight into what God requires of us, too.

God's Word gives insight into our finances, our domestic lives, our close relationships, and our sexuality. As well, God's Word gives insight into the wonders of our salvation, the ways of God, the exercise of our spiritual gifts, how to walk and please God, and the myriad ways there are to advance His Kingdom.

If you are seeking insight into what God would have you do, insight is there for the taking in the pages of your Bible.

The experience of the Jews in Nehemiah's Jerusalem informs us that increased EXPOSURE to God's Word leads to increased INSIGHT! Now, we see that increased INSIGHT leads to increased opportunities for OBEDIENCE.

### **Increased Insight Leads to Increased 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! They observed the Feast of Tabernacles the way God had told them to observe it back in the Law - for the first time in one thousand years! That's right.

*The fruit of a Bible-less 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 the righteous Kings David, Solomon, Hezekiah or Josiah!

We wonder why they had not obeyed. Was it ignorance? Spiritual apathy? An unwillingness to be inconvenienced for one week out of the year by living in tents?

Regardless of the reason/excuse, the result was the same - one thousand years of disobedience was put aside in one fell swoop by the courageous, sacrificial actions of the Jews in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah!

And in the act of obedience, they found JOY!

*[17c]...And there was great rejoicing!*

You know what I find to be so encouraging from this final section of Nehemiah 8? We've seen it before in Nehemiah and here it is again: Once God's people realize His will - it need not take all that long to turn a bad, even a sinful, situation around.

There may be patterns of disobedience in our lives that have been in place for a long time. But none of our "long times" compares to the one thousand years of disobedience known by Nehemiah's Israel.

Yet look at what happened. Days away from the fifteenth of the seventh month, they listened to God's Word, gained insight into His will, discovered that He wanted them living in tents.

They constructed the tents and lived in them. And with that, a millennium of disobedience is turned around.

Brothers and sisters, the Bible's gift to us this morning is HOPE. How many of us, from time to time, despair of ever making progress in our walk with God? We think we are stuck and that our "stuckness" is permanent.

Not true! You can know the joy that comes from obedience to God today as you take the insight you have gained from your exposure to God's word and put it into shoe leather.

### **Conclusion:**

At the beginning, I told you about wonderful seasons of revival with which God had blessed His people through the centuries. We noted that revivals are not scheduled, but are the sovereign work of God, seasons during which He renews, refreshes and re-energizes His people for worship and service.

That said, in most cases of which I am aware, revival came to God's people when they came to the end of themselves, recognized their need for the Lord and gave undivided, serious attention to His Word.

What is the path to revival, as we see it in Nehemiah, chapter 8?

- Seek exposure to God's Word. Pay attention to what the Bible says. Listen to Scripture attentively, because in listening to the Bible, you are listening to God's voice.
- Do what God's Word tells you to do, regardless of how you "feel." Don't wait for the right emotion to be in place before you obey the Bible's commands. Pray and obey - trusting that in the obedience, you will be empowered.
- Live with the expectation that JOY will be your portion as you respond to His Word with submissive obedience.

Bottom line? For revival, re-Bible!