

“Revival Joy”
Nehemiah 8
October 4, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Beginning here in Nehemiah 8, Nehemiah retreats into the background. His name will appear only four more times in the remaining six chapters. In the face of great opposition, he has been faithful. With the completion of the wall, attention is now switched from the building of the wall to the building of the people. In that effort, Ezra returns to assume a central role. By this time, he has been in Jerusalem for 13 years. He too has been faithful, though his work is different from that of Nehemiah. Ezra was a Bible scholar and teacher.

As chapter 8 opens, it has been mere days since the completion of the wall, and something happens that looks like a revival. God’s people approach a preacher, Ezra in this case, and ask him to preach to them. He does so for the better part of six hours. Still the people haven’t had enough of preaching, so the heads of families come back a second day and ask Ezra to teach them some more. The outcome of this all is a deep conviction of sin that leads to joy. “Joy,” wrote C. S. Lewis, “is the serious business of heaven.” God is serious about joy because, as is written in our text, **“the joy of the Lord is your strength”** (v. 10). In the strength of that joy, the people are renewed in their obedience to God and celebrate one of the three great feasts of Israel, the Feast of Tabernacles.

I have often heard Christians say something like, “Things are really bad in this world; we need to pray for revival.” But I notice in this passage, the revival God brings isn’t focused on the pagan nations around Israel, but on God’s people. Revivals begin with God’s people, with the Church. As John Wesley famously prayed, “Bring revival, and start with me.” In Nehemiah 8, we see one of the effects of such revivals on the people of God. There is a renewed interest in God’s word. Let’s look at that now.

I. The Word Preached

When God brings revival of his people, the preached word of God is elevated. I notice here that it is not the preacher who initiates this preaching event, but the people. They gather together and come to Ezra **“to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel”** (v. 1). They are talking about the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. A platform had already been constructed for this purpose (v. 4), and Ezra climbs the stairs, opens the scroll and begins reading. He kept reading from **“early morning until midday”** (v. 3). Some details are filled in later in the text, where

we learn that Ezra had some assistance in this task. The Levites helped him by spreading out among the people to help them understand what was being said by Ezra. We know that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but by now many Jews spoke Aramaic instead of Hebrew. So these Levites both translated and explained. So presumably what happened is that Ezra would read a portion and then the Levites would take time to translate and explain its meaning. Then Ezra would read some more. It is summarized in verse 8. **“They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”**

This text is often studied in seminary homiletics classes. Homiletics is the course designed to teach future pastors how to preach. It is an appropriate text for that, and it teaches us three things about the preaching of God’s word. The first lesson we learn from this about preaching is that the meat and potatoes of God’s people should be expository preaching. This is the kind of preaching you experience here at Altadena, where the sermon is centered on explaining and applying a specific passage of Scripture. The focus of a sermon is a Bible text, not a topic. That is the kind of preaching we see happening in our passage. Ezra started reading in Genesis and read straight through, with appropriate explanations given. This doesn’t mean that there is no place for topical sermons in the church. But even topical sermons should be centered on a passage of Scripture rather than the topic. Even so, our practice here at Altadena is for the majority of preaching to be that of going through entire books of the Bible. We approach preaching in this way because we believe that God knows better what we need than we know ourselves. If we only study the topics we think we need, we end up neglecting large sections of Scripture that we might consider less relevant. But since God knows what we need, it is better to submit to him not only in what he says in an individual passage, but also in the systematic and thorough consideration of every passage.

The reformer John Calvin was famous for his preaching of expository sermons, carefully working his way through books of the Bible a few verses at a time. On Easter Sunday of 1538 he was banished from Geneva and forced to stop his sermon series in the middle of a book of the Bible. Three years later, in 1541, he was invited to return to the city and begin preaching again. What text should he choose for his first sermon back after a three-year hiatus? He simply picked up the biblical text where he left off three years earlier.

A second lesson we learn about the preaching of God’s word is that God’s word is designed to be applied to everyday life. Note the place of this preaching. We are told that it happened in the **“the square before the Water Gate”** (v. 1). It did not happen at the temple. The Water Gate was the gate of the city nearest the spring where the people went to fetch their daily supply of water. So this was a very well-traveled, daily path. The word of God is not just for special holy days, but for every day. It is to be applied to all of life, from the most special days of worship to the most mundane of daily activities, from the joy of Easter

Sunday to changing a dirty diaper. All of life is worship, and the word of God applies practically to every area of life.

Third, the preached word of God is intended by God to be a means of grace among God's people. Consider the powerful things God's word does. By his word, the world was created. It was God's word that freed the people from Babylon, and now it is God's word that is working to form them as the people of God. Toward the end of his life, the apostle Paul charged Timothy about the importance of the preached word of God. **"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching"** (2 Timothy 4:1-2). It is not the case that God elevates preaching to such a high level of importance because preachers are smarter than everyone else. I won't speak for the other preachers at AVPC, but I can assure you that I am not the smartest person in this church. The preached word of God is important simply because it is what God has decided to use to bless his people. It is similar to the story of the healing of Naaman from his leprosy by washing in the Jordan river. It wasn't that there was anything special about the Jordan's waters, but simply that this is what God had decided to use. The application of this truth is seen in verse 3. **"And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law."** Do you do that? Do you honor God's preached word with an attentiveness that expects God to speak to you and sanctify you through the preached word? Or do you do what a church officer I read about this week did? Derek Thomas describes how he was a guest preacher at a church once. As he preached, the clock was nearing noon when he noticed a man sitting near the front looked at his watch in an exaggerated fashion. The man then motioned to his son, and the two of them made an obvious and disruptive exit right in the middle of the sermon. This brings us to our next point about receiving God's word.

II. The Word Received

The way we receive God's word says a great deal about our attitude toward God. To give little attention to God's word is to give little attention to God. You can't say, "God, I love you, but I don't really care to listen to what you say." The people in our text received God's word appropriately. What did that look like.

The first thing I notice is that receiving God's word needs to begin with understanding God's word. Verse 8 gives emphasis to this. **"They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."** God's word doesn't work by way of magic but as it is internalized, and such internalization begins with the understanding. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century emphasized this point. Medieval Catholicism had a different view of God's word, either reading it

or singing it in Latin, though most of the people present didn't understand Latin. They believed that it operated as a means of grace apart from the understanding. The Reformers, on the other hand, insisted that a proper understanding was necessary if the message was to be of benefit.

A second thing I notice about the receiving of God's word is that it is designed to lead us to worship God. Notice the effect of its reading as described in verse 6. **"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."** Receiving God's word may start with the understanding, but it cannot end there. It is designed to lead us to say, "What a great God we have!" This worship involves, among other things, submission to God's authority. It is logically impossible to say at the same time, "God, you are great!" and "I will submit to your authority only to the degree that I find it palatable and agreeable to me." The failure to submit to God's word is to make a god of self. It is to be stiff-necked rather than to bow the head to God's authority. It is our great privilege in worship to reverse the pattern of the first Adam, who asserted his autonomy in rejecting God's authority. We return to paradise and take up our rightful place as we bring ourselves under God's authority. And this is seen particularly in areas where we may find ourselves in disagreement with God's word. To submit only where we agree with God is to put ourselves in the place of greatest authority.

A question I have sometimes received, based on verse 5, is why we don't stand during the reading of God's word in our worship service. We read in verse 5 that as Ezra opened the book and read, **"all the people stood."** Some make of this a requirement whenever God's word is read in a public worship service. I would respond that while there is certainly nothing wrong with standing during the reading of God's word, it is not given here as a command. It is no more normative than other practices of this passage. I would point out that Ezra's sermon here lasted almost six hours, and I've not heard anyone calling for six-hour sermons to be the norm in our churches. I would also point out that there are other passages where people sit in the presence of God's word. Mary, for example, sat at the feet of Jesus when he taught her.

The third lesson this teaches about receiving God's word is that to receive it is to be convicted of sin. Though we will read more of that in the next chapter, it is clear that Ezra's reading of the law led the people to realize their sin and mourn for it. **"For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law"** (v. 9). This is indeed a powerful work of God's Spirit. Since our natural inclination is always self-justification, to hear the Law of God and receive it in such a way that we see our sin and mourn and weep for it is surely a miraculous work from God. When we pray for revival, this is what we are praying for. A deep conviction of sin is a common mark of revival times. But that conviction of sin is not the end, which brings us to our final mark of receiving God's word.

Nehemiah tells the people that it is time to move from grief to joy. He wanted widespread feasting and joy, with no one left out. He wanted them to move on from grief for sin into joy, because **“the joy of the Lord is your strength”** (v. 10). This was in preparation for one of Israel’s three great annual feasts, the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast was celebrated in the fall, and it had two components. First, it was a harvest festival celebrating God’s provision of the recently harvested crops. Second, it was a feast commemorating the provision of God during the forty years of wilderness wanderings. That’s why it’s called a feast of *tabernacles*. A tabernacle is basically a tent, which was how Israel lived during those wilderness wanderings. So for seven days every fall, Israelite families would go camping. They would pitch their tents on top of their houses and in open spaces and live there for the week.

Do you remember what it felt like to camp out in your backyard as a kid? I remember it as an exciting, fun time. Similarly, this feast was a time of joy. It was designed to remind Israel that as long as they had God present with them, even wilderness living could be transformed. Nothing else would be needed. This was the source of joy not just for ancient Israel, but for us as well. If God is present, there can be joy even if you live in a van down by the river. If God is absent, then even life in a palace turns bitter and unhappy. If God is present, even the wilderness of a pandemic can be transformed into joy.

In this feast, Israel was to remember that if God is in the camp, then all will be well. This is also our source of joy. If the Spirit of God, working through the word of God, convicts our hearts of sin, we remember that Jesus, the sin-bearer is among us. Our weeping is turned to joy as we remember sins forgiven. If we lose health, jobs, money or friends, we remember that Jesus is leading us to the Promised Land where there will be abundance of all our hearts long for.

CONCLUSION:

To quote C. S. Lewis again, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” Are you in need of strength today? The joy of the Lord is your strength. And how do we get such joy? We get it through God’s word, as it convicts us of our sin and then reassures us of God’s forgiving and merciful presence. Is there some step God might be calling you to take regarding receiving his word? Perhaps it’s a changed attitude toward the preaching of the word. Or maybe it’s a renewed heart to submit to God’s word in the hard things he might be commanding you. Maybe you’ve been reading God’s word without letting it take you to God in worship. May God revive our hearts and give us joy in him and in his word! Those two cannot be separated. To love God is to love his word.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Nehemiah 8

1. It has often been said that our nation is currently in need of revival. If this passage is describing a revival (which I think it is), what might we expect a revival in our nation to look like if God should grant one?
2. This passage (v. 1-8) has often been used to make the case for regular expository preaching through books of the Bible, in contrast to topical sermons. What benefits do you see in expository preaching?
3. Hebrews 4:12 says that the word of God is living and active. What does it look like to experience the word of God as living and active in our lives?
4. God's word convicted the people of Israel of their sin (v. 9). Describe a recent time in your life when God's word convicted you of sin.
5. Conviction should always lead to joy in the Lord. "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (v. 10). How does the joy the Lord brings strengthen us? Can you think of a time in your life when you experienced this?
6. The Feast of Tabernacles (or "Booths") remembered the time in Israel's history when God was with Israel during their forty years of wilderness wandering. What does this teach us about joy in our own lives?
7. Is there some step God might be calling you to take concerning receiving his word more as it is described in this passage?