SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Nehemiah 8:1-18

By

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Nehemiah Lesson 8

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Two little old ladies were walking out of church one Sunday. One said, “My, that preacher certainly preaches for a long time!” Her friend replied, “No, he really doesn’t preach a long time, it just seems like a long time!” (J. Vernon McGee, Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther [Thru the Bible Books], pp. 139-140.)

I wonder what they would have thought about a service that had about six hours of Bible reading and preaching at the people’s request, during which the people stood the whole time! And not only that, they came back the next day for more! That was the remarkable situation that we read about in Nehemiah 8. It would be accurate to call it a revival or a time of unusual spiritual renewal. At the center of this revival was the exposition of Scripture. In fact, Derek Kidner states, “This day was to prove a turning-point. From now on, the Jews would be predominantly ‘a people of the book’” (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 106).

Our text teaches us that ...

A strong emphasis on God’s Word is a primary mark of spiritual renewal.

Down through the centuries, God’s people have gone through cycles where His Word has been neglected and the spiritual condition of His people deteriorates. In His grace, God sends renewal. Inevitably, one of the main marks of such renewal is a renewed emphasis on God’s Word.

We see this in the Old Testament, when Judah languished under the godless reigns of King Manasseh, and his son, Amon. Amon’s son, Josiah, began to seek the Lord when he was 16 and to institute spiritual reforms. Then Hilkiah the priest found a copy of God’s law and Josiah called the nation to repentance (2 Chron. 34:14). Revival ensued because God’s Word was obeyed.

The same thing happened during the Reformation, which at its heart was a revival of God’s Word. The Roman Catholic Church had neglected the Word. Priests were the only ones with access to
it, and most of them were ignorant of its contents. John Wycliffe and William Tyndale labored to get the Bible translated into common English. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. John Calvin began to preach expository sermons, explaining and applying the Word to the people of Geneva. The Reformation theme, sola scriptura, renewed God’s people.

The same thing was true of the great Puritan revivals in England and America during the 16th and 17th centuries. J. I. Packer (A Quest for Godliness {Crossway Books}, p. 98) writes,

For Puritanism was, above all else, a Bible movement. To the Puritan the Bible was in truth the most precious possession that this world affords. His deepest conviction was that reverence for God means reverence for Scripture, and serving God means obeying Scripture. To his mind, therefore, no greater insult could be offered to the Creator than to neglect his written word; and conversely, there could be no truer act of homage to him than to prize it and pore over it, and then to live out and give out its teaching. Intense veneration for Scripture, as the living word of the living God, and a devoted concern to know and do all that it prescribes, was Puritanism’s hallmark.

Nehemiah 8 shows us four marks of spiritual renewal related to God’s Word:

1. **For spiritual renewal, God’s people must read His Word.**

   The people gathered and asked Ezra to bring the book (scroll) of the Law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel (8:1). They read from it publicly from dawn until noon! Kidner (p. 104) refutes the liberal view, that the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) was the creation of a recent redactor who pieced together the older materials. He says that what Ezra read from was obviously not a new manifesto, but rather “the foundation articles of the faith, laid down at the exodus.” Also, this law had full divine authority. The phase translated, “which the Lord had given to Moses” is literally “commanded Moses.” As Kidner observes, “one does not tamper with material that one would describe in such terms.” The people recognized and respected the fact that God had given this material to Moses, and therefore it was His authoritative word to them.
Copies of the Law of Moses were probably somewhat rare, and many of the Jews may never have heard it read before. Even in the New Testament, Paul instructs Timothy to give attention in church meetings “to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). Until the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, the Bible had to be copied by hand, and often there would only be one copy in a city, often chained to the pulpit. Since people were often illiterate, the Bible had to be read publicly for the common people to know what it says.

God could have communicated with us in some form other than writing. He could have sent an angel to each language group with His message and saved Wycliffe Bible Translators a lot of time and effort! He could have had the message communicated verbally from generation to generation. But He chose to put it in written form. That means that for people to know God and His message of salvation, at least one person in the group, and preferably many, have to learn to read and study. I would argue that the strength of a church will be in direct proportion to the number of people in that church who read and study God’s written Word.

We live in a culture where almost all of us know how to read. Those who can’t read or can’t read well can readily learn how. We have multiple translations of the Bible in our language. And yet most American Christians spend far more time playing pointless computer games or sitting in front of a TV set that spews out garbage than they do reading and studying the words that God has given to us in the Bible!

For the good of your soul I would challenge you to read and reread the Bible all the days of your life. If you want spiritual renewal, it will come through God’s Word. In Psalm 119, which extols God’s Word, nine times the author (probably Ezra) mentions how God’s Word (or some synonym for the Word) brings revival (Ps. 119:25, 50, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156). If you have never done so, I’d encourage you to read through the entire Bible in the New Year. For spiritual renewal, God’s people must read His Word.

2. **For spiritual renewal, God’s people must reverently hear His Word expounded.**
Having ears that work does not guarantee that we really hear. Although God made us with two ears that we cannot close and one mouth that we can (which ought to teach us something!), we sometimes close off our minds so that we do not really hear what is being said, even though we did hear the sounds of the words. Anyone who is married has had that experience. Your wife is talking to you, but you are reading the mail or the paper and you didn’t hear a thing she said. In the same way, it is possible to hear the Bible read or preached and not hear a thing. Your mind was elsewhere.

That’s why Jesus often said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9, 23). He said, “Take care how you listen, for whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him” (Luke 8:18). If the Bible contains the very words that God Himself is saying to us, then it certainly behooves us to listen reverently to what He is saying!

The people in our text were both attentive and reverent when God’s Word was read to them. Verse 3 mentions their attentiveness, and verses 5 & 6 show their reverence. They stood up as if to greet a royal visitor, and then they bowed down in worship. They were not worshiping the actual scroll that Ezra held in his hand, but rather the God who had given the words of that scroll to Moses and through Moses to them.

Attentiveness stems from reverence. If we maintain our reverence for God and that fact that He is speaking to us through His Word, we will pay attention to what He says. If we forget that this is the Word of the living God to us, our minds will wander to other things. I realize that preachers can sometimes be boring. But if I lose your attention, direct your mind to the text of Scripture and ask the Lord to open it to your heart.

Rowland Hill was an 18th century English preacher greatly used of God. Shortly before he died, he was visiting with an old friend who told him that he could still remember the text and part of a sermon that he had heard Hill preach 65 years before. Hill asked him what he remembered. He said that Hill had said that some people when listening to a sermon did not like the delivery of the preacher. Then he said, “Supposing you went to hear the will of one of your relatives read, and you were expecting a legacy from
him. You would hardly think of criticizing the manner in which the lawyer read the will. Rather, you would be all attention to hear whether anything was left to you and if so, how much. That is the way to hear the gospel preached” (told by Charles Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students [Zondervan], pp. 391-392).

Spiritual renewal comes through reverently hearing God’s Word when it is read and preached.

3. For spiritual renewal, God’s Word must be taught.

Verses 7 & 8 report that these men who stood on the platform with Ezra explained the law to the people, “translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.” Scholars debate the meaning of the word “translating” (NASB). Some say that since many of the people spoke Aramaic, the biblical Hebrew had to be translated into Aramaic. But probably the sense of the NIV is correct, that the teachers made the reading of Scripture clear and gave the meaning. Probably Ezra would read a section and then his assistants, perhaps in smaller groups, would expound on that section to make the meaning clear to the people.

Much of the Bible is plain to anyone who can read. As Mark Twain is reputed to have said, it wasn’t the sections of the Bible that he couldn’t understand that bothered him. It was the parts that he could understand that troubled him! But there are some sections of Scripture that are difficult to grasp and so God has given to the church pastors and teachers to help His people understand and apply His Word to their lives. Also, we are blessed with many excellent study tools to help us learn the Word in times of personal study: study Bibles, Bible handbooks, word study books, commentaries, Bible encyclopedias, and theological books.

To properly apply the Bible, you must properly interpret it. To properly interpret it, you must understand what the author meant for the people to whom he was writing in the context of that day. Also, since the Bible fits together as a unified whole, you must get a grasp of everything that the Bible teaches about a subject by comparing Scripture with Scripture, interpreting the Bible by itself. Sometimes this requires historical research to discover the customs and/or historical events that relate to the biblical text. Sometimes it requires either knowing the original biblical languages or consulting
scholars who do in order to understand words and/or grammatical constructions. Always it requires interpreting a particular verse or paragraph of Scripture in the larger context of the book in which it is written. If you take a text out of its context, you can make the Bible say just about anything you wish!

Much could be said, but let me make two observations about sound Bible teaching:

A. Sound Bible teaching must be accurate, clear, and applied to life.

It must be accurate. You can make all sorts of interesting points, but if you are not accurately reflecting what the passage is teaching, you are not teaching the Bible rightly.

It must be clear. Granted, some texts are very difficult to understand (even Peter says such about some of Paul’s writings, 2 Pet. 3:15-16). Sometimes Jesus seemed to be deliberately obscure, especially in His parables, to hide the truth from scoffers. But usually the job of a Bible teacher is to communicate the truth clearly and simply. Martin Luther condemned preachers who aimed at the intellectuals in the crowd to the neglect of helping simple, unlearned people understand saving truth. He said that even though he had more than 40 doctors and magistrates in his church, when he preached he spoke to the young people, children, and servants. If the educated people weren’t impressed, Luther said, the door is open; let them be gone (The Table Talk of Martin Luther, edited by Thomas Kepler [Baker], pp. 253-254).

Sound teaching must be accurate and clear. But also it must be applied to life. As you study the Word personally and if you ever teach it, your aim should be to answer the question, “So what?” What difference should this text make in my life and in the lives of my hearers? John Calvin did not view theology as an end in itself. He said, (cited by T. H. L. Parker, Calvin’s Preaching ([Westminster/John Knox Press], pp. 11-12, 15),

When I expound Holy Scripture, I must always make this my rule: That those who hear me may receive profit from the teaching I put forward and be edified unto salvation. If ... I do not procure the edification of those who hear me, I am a sacrilege, profaning God’s Word.... The Word of God is not
to teach us to prattle, not to make us eloquent and subtle and I know not what. It is to reform our life, so that it is known that we desire to serve God, to give ourselves entirely to him and to conform ourselves to his good will.

B. Sound Bible teaching requires commitment on the part of the teacher and the taught.

Those who teach must be committed to take the time and effort to study and prepare. You cannot teach the Bible accurately, clearly, and with proper application to life if you just read a text and say whatever pops into your mind at the moment. And yet many pastors do just that, claiming that the Spirit is leading them! Even the apostles, who were taught directly by Christ and by the Holy Spirit, had to say no to certain ministry demands so that they could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). If they had to devote themselves to the task of preaching, how much more do we!

But the ones who are taught also must be committed to the Word. In the church this means that those who are not gifted in the area of teaching take on other necessary ministry tasks so that those who teach can study and prepare. In other words, there must be a division of labor according to spiritual gifts.

You see this principle in Nehemiah 8. Until now, Nehemiah has been in the forefront. He was a gifted administrator who could organize and mobilize people to get the wall built. But when it came time to teach the Word, he took a back seat to Ezra, who was skilled in the law of Moses, who had set his heart to study it, practice it, and teach it (Ezra 7:6, 10). These two men illustrate beautifully the principle of team ministry.

Thus for spiritual renewal, God’s people must read His Word, reverently hear His Word, and the Word must be taught. Finally,

4. For spiritual renewal, God’s people must respond to His Word.

It is spiritually dangerous to study the Word without the goal of obedient response. Knowledge apart from obedience leads to pride (1 Cor. 8:1). Our aim, as Calvin put it, should always be to transform our lives by Scripture. There are five responses here:
A. Repentance.

The people wept when they heard and understood God’s Word (8:9), because they realized how much they had sinned against God. We will see this in more detail in chapter 9. But the fact is, the more the light of God’s holy Word shines into our hearts, the more we will see areas where we do not conform to His righteousness. Spiritual renewal always involves repentance.

B. Joy.

The clouds of godly repentance should quickly break up, allowing the sun of godly joy to flood our hearts (8:9-10). God never wounds us to hurt us, but only to heal. The joy of knowing that He has forgiven all of our sins and that we are His people should fill our hearts. We will look further at verse 10 in our next study.

C. Good deeds.

Ezra and Nehemiah reminded the people to send portions from the part of the sacrifices that they could eat to those who had nothing (8:10). God’s Word should produce compassion in our hearts for the needy. His salvation is “to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14).

D. Obedience.

The people heard in the reading of the Law that they should observe the Feast of Booths. Since it was only two weeks away, they immediately made preparations to do it. This feast commemorated both the harvest that God had just provided and the deliverance that He had granted under Moses, when Israel lived in temporary shelters in the wilderness. The Israelites had not celebrated a Feast of Booths like this one since the time of Joshua (8:17)! Again it is noted that their obedience resulted in great rejoicing.

E. Worship.

The Feast of Booths lasted a whole week, and every day consisted of more reading of God’s law, culminating in a solemn assembly on the final day (8:18). In other words, there was great rejoicing along with reverential attention to God’s Word. As the people camped in the temporary shelters, they reflected back on God’s faithful dealings with the nation, in spite of their sins. And so they were filled with gratitude and love toward God for His gra-
cious dealings with them. The reading, study, and preaching of God’s Word should produce in all of us a heart of worship as we reflect on His abundant mercies toward us.

**Conclusion**

Chuck Swindoll (Hand Me Another Brick [Thomas Nelson Publishers], pp. 152-153) tells of a time when he spoke at a family conference. He noticed a young couple with several small children. Although they looked and sounded like a Christian family, it was evident to him that they were very miserable. He knew that divorce was on the back burner of their minds.

But as the week progressed, he saw that couple change as they listened to the teaching of God’s Word. The husband hung on every word. The wife had her Bible open and followed the messages closely. At the end of the week, this couple came up to Swindoll and his wife and said, “We want you to know that this week has been a 180-degree turnaround experience for us. When we came, we were ready to separate. We’re going back stronger than we have ever been in our marriage.” But that joyous news was dampened by another family’s response. Chuck continues,

At the same conference with the same speakers, the same truths, the same surroundings, the same schedule, another father was turned off. He wasn’t open. He attended the first few sessions, but by and by the guilt became so great and the conviction so deep that he went home. He had stayed awake the entire night before and reached the decision to leave and not come back. His family left hurting—perhaps even more than when they came.

What was the difference? Swindoll says, “attitude.” The couple who benefited had teachable hearts. The other man did not.

Some people come to church with reverence for God and His Word, saying, “God, teach me! I want to know You more!” They are ready to respond to the Word. They profit from the teaching. Others come to the same service with sin in their hearts that they don’t want to deal with. They are turned off by the very same message that helps others to grow. If you want spiritual renewal, check your heart. It comes when responsive hearts read and reverently hear God’s Word faithfully proclaimed.
Discussion Questions

1. How can a non-studious type develop a hunger to read and study God’s Word?

2. How can we develop the kind of responsive hearts that are needed to profit from God’s Word?

3. How can we guard ourselves from the spiritual pride that often accompanies knowledge (see 1 Cor. 8:1)?

4. Jot down one spiritual goal that you could work on in response to this message.

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