

How Does True Revival Look Like? Nehemiah 8

Good morning! We all know there's conflict going on in another part of the world today. Ukraine vs. Russia. It's like David and Goliath as some have said. Militarily, Ukraine is no match for the might and power of Russia. For example, Russia has 900,000 active personnel in its army and 2 million in reserve. Meanwhile, Ukraine has 196,000 active personnel and 900,000 reservists. Russia's air force is nearly five times as strong, with 165,00 to Ukraine's 35,000. Regarding weaponry and vehicles, Russia has more than 15,857 armored fighting vehicles to Ukraine's 3,309. It has more than 10 times the aircraft -- 1,391 to Ukraine's 128, and 821 helicopters to Ukraine's 55, if you include Navy aircraft. Where Russia has 49 submarines, Ukraine has none.

But, as we've seen, Goliath Russia is having a hard time taking down David Ukraine. You know why? Because of sheer combat will among Ukrainian troops. They are defending their homes and families against Russian acts of violence. This is their armed force's greatest strength.

I can't help but draw parallels between this modern-day conflict and the Old Testament conflict between Nehemiah and his small army consisting of mostly civilians and their enemies in the persons of Sanballat and Tobiah and their much larger and better equipped soldiers. How in the world did the poorly equipped Israelites repel and defeat the enemy? Because of sheer combat will! They were defending their homes and families against acts of violence by Sanballat and his cohorts. But, more importantly, they were drawing their strength and power from the one who gave them victory, the Lord God himself. As the Bible says in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

And so, here we are, concluding our series on "Time to Build".

As we build and rebuild our lives, we always have to remember that God is for us. God is with us. God is inside of us. That is, if you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. You cannot be a conqueror in this world unless you have the Holy Spirit in you. And speaking of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit has a great role in building and rebuilding your life. Now, when we talk about rebuilding, we're talking about revival.

Now, just think of the word "revive" itself. To be 're-lived', something has to have been "-vived" in the first place. It must first be 'alive' in order to be 'revived'. Revival, then, is a matter of God giving 'renewed life' to that which is already His work. It's a matter of God 'reviving' his people and his church.

So, in this last part of our series, I want to speak about revival this morning. I've entitled this message, "How Does True Revival Look Like?" I'd like to talk about how revival takes place and what happens when there's a revival. I want you to turn now in your Bibles to Nehemiah, the eighth chapter. I will go through chapter in this message and so please keep it open there to track along.

So, we've seen in the previous chapters how the Israelites poured their all in the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. It was a very challenging work, made worse by the opposition they encountered outside and inside their ranks. But they did it. After 52 days, they were done. But now they sensed a need for a personal encounter with God, for God just to come down and to let them know that He was there; to refresh their spirit. They needed to get to know God in a closer way and a greater way. It's a feeling that many of us could relate to. Like, after putting so many hours in ministry, you have to be refilled. You need refueling, so to speak. That's why our missions team always have an R&R after each outreach in the Phils. I hope that encourages you to join next year, right. So, you need refreshing in order for you to be able to do God's work again.

Like after this service, and after our fellowship, and after lunch with my family, I will sleep like a baby at home. But if I have an appointment with you, don't worry just bring chocolates, for energy, you know, and I'll be fine.

Well, that's physical revival. For spiritual revival, you don't need sleep. You need to be awake. You need a fresh intake of the Word of God. Whenever God revives, God does it through His word. Whenever God saves, God does it through His word. So, let me give you a picture of how true revival looks like from chapter 8 of Nehemiah. Let me share with you the **characteristics of true revival.**

First, it is characterized by a

I. A DESIRE FOR THE WORD

I want you to see in verse one that this revival came because, first of all, there was a desire for the Word of God. Look at what the Bible says in verse 1, Nehemiah 8, "all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel."

Now, we see Ezra, the priest, the author of the book of Ezra, appears for the first time in the book of Nehemiah. Thirteen years earlier he had led a return from Persia to rebuild the temple and to teach the Law of God. Apparently, he had been occupied in that task all through the time of the rebuilding of the wall. But when the people had finished their work, they were desperate to hear from the Word of God, so they sent for Ezra to lead them.

They asked him to bring the Law of the Lord and to read it to them. This would undoubtedly be the entire Pentateuch--the first five books of the Bible. This indicates the tremendous desire of these people for truth. They listened, while standing, from daybreak until noon as verse 3 tells us.

Certainly, this long attention indicates how deeply they were aware of their ignorance about life and how much they needed answers from God. They were simply crying out for the Word.

Today, there needs to be a cry from the hearts of God's people like the cry of Job who said, "I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread." (Job 23:12)

There has to be a desire for the Word of God. Dust on your Bible means dirt in your heart. Open your Bible. Is that the first app you open on your phone in the morning? Do you have a consuming desire to hear what God has to say?

You see, the work that God does to renew and revive His people has always been through His word. As He Himself says through the prophet Isaiah, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

So, the people came to hear what God would say and they came with the attitude, "Lord you speak and we will listen. We're going to stay as long as you are speaking to our hearts." They never tired of hearing the word.

You know, if you went one day or two days or three days without physical food, can you imagine how your body would be craving food? Can you imagine how your body would be crying out for just a drop of water? Yet, many people who claim to be Christians and who claim the name of Christ go, not just one day, two days, three days, but many days and some even months and years and never have a meal at the banquet table of God.

God says that if revival is going to come, we must have a desire for the Word of God. We must desire what God would say to our hearts. So, there was a desire for the Word.

The second thing we notice is, in true revival there is

II. A DECLARATION OF THE WORD.

Look in verses 2-3, “So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.”

Not only was there a desire for the Word on the part of the people, but there was the declaration of the Word by the man of God to preach to the people and that is the method of God in bringing revival. God always uses preaching or the declaration of His Word when He is going to do the work in our hearts and in our lives.

Paul said that God has chosen by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. So, you show me a church that is alive, and you show me a church where God is blessing. You show me a church where souls are being saved and where lives are being changed and you show me a church where God is moving because of the preaching of the Word.

So, not only must there be a desire for the Word, but there must also be a declaration of the Word if revival is to come.

Do you remember the story of Ezekiel in the Bible? God called Ezekiel to preach, and He said, "I want you to preach my Word and I've got a church for you!"

Ezekiel said, "Lord, I don't know if I can do it or not but show me my church."

The Lord said, "Alright and let's walk together." They walked together thru the city, and they walked out into the suburbs. They walked out into the villages, and they walked out into the small places, way out on the backside of the county. Do you understand that this is the Rolly-expanded translation?

Well, Ezekiel and the Lord kept on walking. They walked out so far that they were out in the desert and there wasn't anything for miles. Ezekiel became concerned about his church. He said, "Lord, I don't remember a church listed way out here in the Associational minutes." God said, "Don't worry about it, Ezekiel, there is one out here. We just haven't come to it yet."

So, they walked on and they got into a wilderness place and they went up a high mountain. They could see below them a great valley. The Bible says that the valley was filled with bones, and it said, "Behold, they were very dry!"

God said to Ezekiel, "That's your church." Ezekiel said, "Lord, that doesn't look like any church that I've ever seen."

The Lord said, "That is just like the church that I'm going to give most preachers!"

Now, you read your Bible. What did God say to Ezekiel to do to bring that church to life so that the Spirit of God could move?

He said, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.'" (Eze. 37:4-5) Ezekiel began to preach and the Bible says that they took on muscle and flesh and blood and sinew. What was once the valley of dry bones was now a mighty army ready to march at the will and the command of the almighty God.

So, if revival is going to come, there has to be a desire for the Word of God and the declaration of the Word. But then I want you to see that another characterisc is.

III. A DEVOTION TO THE WORD

Look at verses 5 and 6.

“Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

Now, think of Ezra—the reader of God’s word. He was leading the people in worship. He was praising the Lord. And think of the people. They were very active. In fact, it’s hard to follow them in what they were doing. First, they were lifting their hands and saying “Amen!”—which is to say, “It is true!” And then, they were bowing their heads and worshiping the Lord with their faces to the ground. They were up and down—emotionally high in enthusiasm, and humbly low in reverent awe.

And I hope you’ll allow me to offer a word of caution here. In times past, some have tried to manipulate people into ‘revival’ through such outward emotional expressions. I want to say this carefully; but some try to simply ‘work up the crowd’ into a state of a mere emotional frenzy and then call it ‘revival’. But that’s not true revival. I believe, of course, that true revival is often very emotional. When a community of people are being brought into a deep encounter with the living God in a transforming way, how can they not be emotional? But that transformation is not brought about by the emotions!

It's brought about by understanding God's word; and that understanding—renewed by God's word—results in a transformed inner disposition; and it's that transformed inner disposition that shows itself in genuine emotion.

I say that because I believe it's very wrong and hurtful to try to do things the other way around. Bypassing the understanding, and just trying to work up the emotions—well, that only leads to a temporary emotional state that dissipates after the meeting is over. People's lives aren't spiritually transformed by that. But when we hear the truth of God's word in the power of the Holy Spirit; and genuinely understand what we hear; and it so grips our hearts that we are transformed inwardly by an awakened understanding—when that renewed understanding shows itself in our being made to grasp who God really is; and we become awestruck by His majestic holiness, and begin to realize who we are in His sight and how much we need His grace—then we worship God in great emotion. When that happens, I believe we're seeing a true work of God—true revival.

That's why I believe it's so important that the meaning of God's word be explained, and that people be helped to understand what it says in such a way that it feeds their minds and grips their hearts. Look at what it says in verses 7-8;

“The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.”

That's why they displayed such emotion in their worship. May God so impact us with a clear understanding of His word that we become inwardly transformed by truth—and may that inward transformation show itself in outward expressions of deep, emotional worship!

That kind of passionate worship of God's majesty is a characteristic of true revival. Another characteristic of true revival is this.

IV. A DEEP SORROW BECAUSE OF THE WORD

Apparently, as the word of God was being read to the people, and as their understanding was being opened, and as they became increasingly overwhelmed with an emotional worship of God as He truly is, they began to get a sense of their own sinfulness before Him. We see something of this in verse 9; where it says,

“Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.”

I believe we can understand this to have been a mourning over sin; because, in chapter 9, we read of how the people wrote a great public confession of sin and presented it to God in repentance. And so, this is another chief characteristic of true times of revival—a deep and sincere and profound mourning over sin that comes from an encounter with God.

One of the great examples of this is found in Isaiah 6. At the time that God called Isaiah into the prophetic ministry, He gave him a vision of Himself in heavenly glory—“high and lifted up”. God allowed Isaiah to see the angelic hosts singing loud praises all around the throne of God; and allowed him to feel the temple shaking and the pillars trembling at the glory of His majesty. And when Isaiah saw the majesty holiness of God, he responded by mourning over his own sin. He took a look at the glory of God and said, “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’” (Isaiah 6:5).

But it's not a time that's characterized only by sorrowing and mourning.

When we feel great sorrow before God for our sin and our disobedience of His commandments, and when we respond by turning with all our being to Jesus Christ for cleansing from our sins, then that deep sorrow turns into an even deeper and more permanent joy!

I believe this is also a characteristic of true revival. And it's

V. A DELIGHT OVER THE WORD

After sorrow, there's joy. There's joy because here's a notable transformation in people. So, at first, they go through an unspeakably terrible time of sorrow over the guilt of sin—almost as if they feel God should just cast them into the flames of hell right then and there! But then—gradually for some; quite suddenly for others—God gives a profound and overwhelming sense of His love and forgiveness. The dark cloud of sorrow lifts. God assures their hearts that they have been washed clean in His sight by the blood of Jesus, and that they now belong to Him. And as deeply as they sorrowed over their sin and felt that they deserved eternal punishment, they have even more joy over their forgiveness through Christ, and rejoice that they have an eternal home in heaven. And in true revival, that confident joy lasts for a lifetime!

We see this in verses 10-12, "Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' The Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.' Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.’ And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them”’.

Finally, a characteristic that accompanies true revival is

VI. A DESIRE TO OBEY THE WORD

One of the things that most characterizes true revival is genuine, lasting life change. People who used to have no care at all about following the Lord’s commands and instructions now eagerly seek to do so. They want to obey God. Verses 13-15 tell us,

“On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month 15 and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.”

This was a command that God gave Moses to give to the people of Israel long ago. They were to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles at a certain time of year—to commemorate their time of wandering in the wilderness. They were reminded of this command as Ezra had read to them from the Book of Leviticus; and they wasted no time in obeying it.

Now, in verses 16-17, we read “So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate

and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.”

Think of that! They had neglected to obey this command since the days of Joshua! That means that they had been disobeying it for about eight centuries! But now—having heard of their neglect, they began doing what God had told them to do.

There’s an important spiritual lesson in this concerning obedience. When God draws a people to a deeper relationship with Himself, obedience doesn’t necessarily occur all at once. It grows. The people didn’t know everything they were to do yet; and they didn’t try to become perfect overnight. Instead, they began obeying right where they were. They heard from the reading of God’s word about what they had been neglecting, repented of their disobedience, and began obeying in that one thing. As we read on in the book of Nehemiah, other areas of neglect began to be revealed to them later on, and they repented in those things too.

Genuine revival isn’t characterized by instantaneous perfection. ‘Instantaneous perfection’ doesn’t really last long. Rather, true revival is characterized by a growing obedience—a life-long process in which the Lord Jesus reveals truth to us from His word at just the time in life in which we need it, and takes increasing rule over every area of our lives progressively. We grow in our obedience over a lifetime.