

“Consecration”
 Nehemiah 8:1-10:39
 Carol Martin

Those were glorious days in Jerusalem. A new spirit of patriotism and pride surged through the Jewish community; the walls had been completed; and plans were being laid for many to move into the capital from outlying regions. The preparations for home construction were going forward everywhere in the city.

Now, just a week after the last door had been hung in the gateways of the wall, it was time for the New Year festival. The Jewish religious New Year began in April with Passover; however, the civil New Year began with the “coming of the seventh month – Tishri,” which would be September-October. It was sort of a sabbatical month, just as there is a Sabbath day and a sabbatical year. The day was proclaimed with a trumpet call to usher in not only the New Year but the Feast of Trumpets. Also during the month of Tishri, ten days later, this feast was followed by a fast – the Day of Atonement, which is not mentioned (but alluded to) in this passage of Scripture. Then on days 15-22 of Tishri came a week-long Feast of Tabernacles (or ingathering) as thanksgiving for the harvest. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

The excitement of the New Year brought the people flocking and they gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate, southeast of the temple. (Remember that the Water Gate was symbolic for the Word of God – this is where they get that.) Since the meeting was not in the temple, and it was a festive occasion, women and older children were present along with the men. For the occasion a wooden platform had been erected, high enough so those who mounted it could be seen by everyone in the crowd.

Think for a moment about what’s happening here . . . the walls are built, consolidation is underway, and now it’s time for redefining government. But the people are not really ready. If the people continue in the course they have been taking, they will ultimately fail. Traitors are within the city, intrigue is rampant, and foreigners have great disruptive influence. There is a need for a solid foundation to be laid if they are to rebuild Israel with a future.

Our own forefathers recognized this need for a solid foundation. Thomas Jefferson said, “The Bible is the cornerstone of liberty.” Andrew Jackson claimed, “The Bible is the rock on which our republic rests.” We have to be honest and admit how disregard for the Bible has already threatened the well-being of our own nation. As we scan the highways of history, we find them strewn with the wreckage of those nations that forgot God. From the earliest times to the present there is not a single record of any civilization maintaining its moral fiber without an adequate religious foundation. All of this highlights the importance of the spiritual renewal of the Jews in Jerusalem. The Israelites needed to be right with God if they were to prosper as a nation. Without a firm foundation in God, they were unfit for self-government.

So Ezra and 13 other men mounted the podium and Ezra led them in prayer and read from the scroll of the Law of Moses. That's important because this was not some newly concocted code with a Mosaic flavor. But it was the foundation of their faith that dated back to the days of Moses and the Exodus.

As Ezra invoked God's blessing on those present, they responded by saying, "Amen!" Throughout their reactions we catch a glimpse of the people's heart. They are conscious of their need and readily join Ezra's prayer by lifting their heads and turning their palms heavenward. Traditionally this is the Jewish way of saying, "Lord, I am empty handed, I have nothing, everything I need comes from you." And, as they bow and worship before the Lord, their actions indicate their submission to His authority.

I was reminded of Martha Snell Nicholson's poem called "Treasures" as I read this. Listen . . .

One by one God took them from me
 All the things I valued most
 Till I was empty handed
 Every glittering toy was lost.
 And I walked earth's highways
 Grieving in my rags and poverty
 Until I heard His voice inviting
 "Lift those empty hands to me."

And I turned my hands toward heaven
 And He filled them with a store
 Of His Own transcendent riches
 Till they could contain no more.
 And at last I comprehended
 With my stupid mind, and dull,
 That God **could** not pour His riches
 Into hands already full.

Ezra read from daybreak till noon – about six hours. Clearly he did not just read on and on without interruption. The people were hungry to know God's Word and certainly it's possible that, while the people were in captivity, they may well have become more accustomed to the Aramaic language used by the Babylonians and Syrians – so several other men and Levites circulated throughout the crowd explaining, interpreting and even translating perhaps.

The response of the crowd to the reading of the Law was impressive, wasn't it? When Ezra opened the scroll, they stood up out of respect or adoration. The people heard the Word of God and understood it. That is remarkable. Like a mirror that won't

compromise the truth of the wrinkles on your face, so the Scripture reflected the truth of the sin of the people.

I want to address a couple of things here that I think we need to apply to our lives today.

In this study we see revival begin to sprout as the Law of Moses rains down upon the people's parched hearts and minds. There was reading of the Scripture, praise for the Scripture, and insight into the Scripture.

Today there is a disturbing similarity between our physical and spiritual eating habits — both are becoming more centered on fast-food dining as a way of life. For example, how many of us hurry each week through a calendar of biblical victuals similar to this:

Sunday-school: an appetizer out of James
 A helping from Matthew during worship
 Tuesday: a prayer meeting snack on Philippians
 Thursday: Bible study group entrée from Nehemiah
 Daily fifteen minute nibbles on Acts.

With all this food, why aren't some of us being revived spiritually? There's nothing wrong with the food, it's divine. Perhaps we get so little nutritionally because we allow so little time for our hearts and minds to digest it. By digesting, I mean seeking understanding, discussing with others, personalizing the passage, memorizing and finding application.

It's wonderful that the spontaneous study of the Bible on the part of laymen is one of the most exciting phenomena of modern times. Laymen have not always had access to the Scriptures. In 1503, when Martin Luther was studying at Erfurt, he accidentally discovered a copy of the Bible in the library of the university. He had never seen a whole Bible before and his "discovery" thrilled him. He was amazed to find that there was far more in it than the portions of Scripture selected for use in the services of the church. Dr. Usinger, one of Luther's teachers, tried to discourage young Luther from reading the Word: "Ah, Brother Martin, what is there in the Bible? It is better to read the books by the ancient doctors. They have already sucked the honey of the truth. The Bible is the cause of all the troubles in the church."

In 1534, after Martin Luther had translated the Bible into German, the common people turned to it eagerly, buying thousands of copies. One Catholic prelate lamented: "Even shoemakers, women, and ignorant people, who have learned only a little German, are eagerly reading the Bible as the fountain of all truth, and that, with such frequency that they know it by heart. They carry it about with them and have attained such knowledge of it that they dispute not only with Catholic laymen, but with doctors

of theology about faith and the gospel." Oh, that we would know the Word of God that well!!

There's a sad but humorous story about a teacher named Warsaw who quizzed a group of college-bound high school juniors and seniors about the Bible. These are some of the answers he got:

"Jezebel was Ahab's donkey."

"Sodom and Gomorrah were lovers."

"New Testament writers were Matthew, Mark, Luther and John."

"Jesus was baptized by Moses."

"Epistles were wives of the Apostles."

"Golgotha was the name of the giant who slew the apostle David."

We must not only know what Scripture says, but just as these people did, we must let it penetrate our lives. As Ezra read, the people responded. Dr. Cyril Barber in his commentary on Nehemiah tells this about C. H. Spurgeon, "When he came to London he found that the people were so starved, that a morsel of the gospel was a treat for them. He began expounding the Scriptures and a remarkable work for the Lord took place. People were saved week by week without the need of an evangelist. Years later, when Spurgeon died, it was said the people in his congregation knew more of their Bibles than the theologians. The key lay in exposition of Scripture . . . Spurgeon taught it, the people heard it and applied it to their lives and the result was a continuous movement of the Spirit in their midst." That's the key – first you know the truth, then you act on it.

So much of chapter eight of Nehemiah crystallizes our thinking on the Word of God. F. B. Meyer gave some excellent advice regarding the Bible: "Each day read a chapter or passage with the idea that you are receiving your marching orders, that there is some new service to render, some new duty to perform, and some new virtue to acquire. When you hear – do! What you have been taught, embody in action."

We know how the Word of God cuts and convicts . . . and it was no exception for those gathered. The reading of the Law affected people so deeply they broke down and wept as they realized they had not kept it. The response of Nehemiah and the other leaders might be paraphrased like this: "Although the Day of Atonement will come soon when penitence is expressed, this is New Year's Day! It is a day of joy, do not mourn or weep. This is a day of rejoicing - the Feast of Trumpets!" He sent them away telling them to eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and to share with all who cannot provide for themselves. It was a time for people to avail themselves of the provision to reconcile themselves to God. It was a day to be joyful and glad! There is no mention of the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the month, but it would be unthinkable that they would ignore it when the whole community was trying to do everything "by the book."

The people of Nehemiah's day experienced the joy of the Lord because He had again become the center of their lives. They felt secure in their relationship to Him. They could revel in the feeling of well-being, protection, care and freedom from concern. With His blessing upon them, they felt competent to face the future. That resulted in strength and rejoicing because God's Words had been made known. I hope you know the joy of the Lord. That He's the center of your life. It's not new, but it's still true . . . the secret of Joy is J-O-Y: Jesus, Others, Yourself.

The second day the people thirsted for more of God's Word and Ezra read concerning the Feast of Tabernacles . . . a feast designed to help them remember how their ancestors lived in tents during the Exodus and how God continually provided for them. This feast had not been celebrated with joy like this for over a thousand years, since the days of Joshua. Think of what it would be like to have ignored honoring the Lord's Supper for the last thousand years, and to just now be reading and recognizing that the Lord asked to be remembered in this way. And don't think this couldn't happen in our day. We must be watchmen not to let just one aspect of God's Word become the only thing we follow, but that we adhere to the whole counsel of God.

So, in chapter 8 was the conviction, chapter 9 is the confession, and in chapter 10 we'll see the covenant.

On the 24th of the month the celebration was over and the crowd gathered in sackcloth and ashes to signify mourning. This had been a profoundly moving time in their corporate spiritual lives. The service was a long one – three hours of reading Scripture and three hours of worship. Then we read of their prayer of confession that recognized both God's grace and man's sinfulness.

Chapter 9 is unique because it is the longest prayer recorded in the Bible. The opening resembles Matthew 6 Lord's Prayer by beginning with sense of awe and adoration of the Father. If you were to sort of outline it, we'd see they . . .

- Looked up in adoration and praise 5,6
- Looked back in reflection and thanksgiving 7-31
- Looked around in petition and confession 32-37
- Looked ahead in direction and commitment 38

What becomes abundantly clear in this long penitent prayer is that God in His grace made an everlasting unconditional covenant with Abraham that extended to his descendants, and that God will therefore never cast off Israel completely. But subsequently God made a conditional covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai in which He imposed regulations and decrees on Israel. Obedience would bring blessing, disobedience loss of blessing and ultimately foreign oppression and exile from the land.

You can see from chapter 9:36-37 clearly that the leaders of Nehemiah's day didn't regard this restoration to the land as fulfillment of the great prophecies of restoration. "We are slaves, we are in great distress," they said. Therefore, it was high time to get their act together so their sins would no longer impede God's blessing upon them.

In 9:38 we read, "And because of all this we make a sure covenant and write it and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it." This leads into chapter 10. And who led the signing? Nehemiah led the way.

Notice that they entered the covenant intelligently, seriously and permanently and they sealed it with both an oath and a curse.

An oath is a vivid term that actually means to "seven" oneself. In that day Hebrews didn't seal a contract or an oath with just a mere handshake or a signature on a piece of papyrus. Instead, they did seven things related to their oath as a way of binding themselves to the keeping of their promise. For example, we studied in Genesis 21 when Abraham made a promise to King Abimelech – he made the oath with the giving of seven ewe lambs. Even though we're not told what seven things these people did, Ecclesiastes 5:5 says, "It is better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it." That reminds us of the seriousness of making a vow to God and they took this very seriously.

The three major problems at the time of this covenant were 1) intermarriage of the Jews with the heathens and the breakdown of the home; 2) the disregard for the fourth commandment about observing the Sabbath; and 3) financial support of the priests and Levites. So those issues were addressed in the covenant.

Regarding intermarriage basically they said, we will not let our daughters marry non-Jewish men and we won't let our sons marry non-Jewish girls.

This prohibition against mixed marriages had nothing to do with racial snobbery, but was to keep the true faith from being submerged in a sea of idolatry. Ezra had dealt with the matter some 13 years before and Nehemiah was to face it again in about 15 years. Today we still see the problems created when believers willingly becoming yoked with non-believers.

They agreed to stop commerce on the Sabbath and agreed to keeping of the seventh (Sabbatical) year when debts were canceled for fellow Jews, and generally the greed of financial gain was curbed. Accepting the prohibition against commercial activity on the Sabbath was a serious temptation/habit to overcome. Don't think any of this was easy. While it was taken for granted that Jew and Jew would not engage in such activity, it was a very real temptation for rationalization for Jews to trade with non-Jews in the heavily secular environment of Jerusalem as we'll see in chapter 13.

Release of debt in the Sabbatical year was a major issue because of the problem we studied in Nehemiah 5. (Having to sell family into slavery for survival).

Construction and maintenance of the temple had generously been provided for by Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, but it wasn't going to last forever, nor was it wise that it should do so. He who holds the purse strings commonly reserves the right to dictate policy. Worship that does not cost the worshiper anything is no worship at all, and the worshiper loses the blessing of giving.

A temple tax would be paid, wood for the burnt offerings provided, as well as the first fruits of everything including sons, cattle, herds and flocks. God was to get the best of everything! Recall in the book of Malachi the people were challenged: Malachi 3:10: Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing, that you will not have room enough for it.

They had been short-changing God by not giving Him their best. It wasn't how much they gave, but their attitude in giving. It was a "me-first then God" attitude that brought them God's chastisement.

I want to interject just one little thought here to take home with you. Ernest Hemingway had a practice that should give us food for thought. On the first day of each New Year, he gave away some of his most prized possessions. People invariably asked why, and his answer was always the same: "If I can give these things away, then I own them. But if I can't give them away because they have somehow become so important to me, then they own me." Is there anything truth in that for you?

The people signed and expressed a positive, "We will not neglect the house of our God."

Just a few quick thoughts to close . . .

In this lesson we can see some of the principles of revival. Evangelism is winning the unsaved; revival has to do with the Christian. Evangelism is the permanent duty of the church; revival is a gracious outpouring of the Spirit of God. It's possible to even have a measure of success in evangelism without ever having revival, but genuine revival in the church would lead to an inevitable mighty blessing in evangelism.

So let us look at four principles of revival and ask ourselves if we're willing to apply them to our own lives and corporately, to our own churches.

1. First, a Return to broken heartedness — 9:1,2 The people assembled with fasting, sackcloth and dirt on their heads. They stood and confessed their sins and the sins of their fathers.

In Chapter 8 we had the Feast of Trumpets (8:16) and there was very great gladness. Feasting turned to fasting, joy became humiliation. God doesn't plant the seed of His life upon the soil of a hard, unbroken spirit. He plants where conviction of the Holy Spirit has brought brokenness, where the soil has been watered with tears of repentance as well as tears of joy.

2. Second, a Reflection upon God's goodness — Practically all of chapter 9 is devoted to prayer the people offered. Praise for who God is and His faithfulness (Notice the little connective word "and" in 9:6-15 . . . God's continued faithfulness). Then in verse 16 we have the little word "but" we . . . and they enumerate the confession of their sin. And God was faithful, but we were not.

3. Third, a Recognition of our sinfulness — 9:23 It's a tremendous moment in a Christian's life when he can honestly look into the face of God and say, "You are right, I am wrong." For the Christian the unforgivable sin is the one you won't confess. God longs to extend forgiveness.

4. Fourth, a Renewal of our obedience — Chapter 10. It touched their home life (vs. 29-30), their social life (vs.30) and their spiritual life (vs. 39). Faithfulness in giving and faithfulness in worship. Revival is not just emotional upheaval – it leads to action.

Revival is for those who are already spiritually alive but have grown faint in their love for the Lord. It is after weakened Christians have been revived through proclamation of God's Word that you see the second familiar characteristics of all revivals, the revived going out to share the gospel with those still dead in sin.

God's clearly defined means for revival then is just these 4 things: our return to broken heartedness (a tenderness of heart in which He can plant the seeds to bear the fruit of the Spirit); a reflection on God's goodness (taking time for meditation); recognition of our sinfulness (an honest self-evaluation); and a renewal of obedience (that puts revival into action).

This entire time from the Feast of the Trumpets to the Feast of Tabernacles was a time of thanksgiving for the Jews. They had returned to their native land; once again they had a protected city; and they were beginning a time of spiritual renewal. The future looked bright!

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, may Your Word we've studied today penetrate our hearts with renewed joy in our salvation. You are faithful and we offer You our adoration and praise. Thank You for the Holy Spirit who convicts us of our sins and helps us to grow spiritually as we develop the fruit of the Spirit. Thank You for Jesus, our blessed hope. It's in His name we pray. Amen.
Please stand for the Doxology.