



THE POWER OF SCRIPTURE • Repentance and Renewal

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Nehemiah 8:1-10:39

Overview

The word “Revival” may have various connotations for different people. By “revival,” we are referring to times when God’s people are brought to humble brokenness, confession of sin and a renewed devotion to Christ. These are all components of repentance. Personal revival can happen to an individual at any time as they respond to God’s Spirit at work in their life. Large-scale revivals, where great multitudes are spiritually awakened, are special works of the Spirit that have happened sporadically throughout the history of the church and Israel. Some of these large-scale revivals through the centuries still impact our world today.

This study looks at the great revival that took place just after the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon. Nehemiah is very clear about how the revival started: it began with, and was centered on, the Scriptures. This is not the only way a revival begins, but it was clearly the case in the revival recorded by Nehemiah, and has typically been the case throughout the history of the church.

The central theme of the second half of the book of Nehemiah is to show how the Jewish exiles not only returned to the Land, but returned to the Lord. This was accomplished through the preaching, hearing and understanding of the Word of God. The Scriptures were the vehicle through which the Spirit brought conviction, repentance, confession, forgiveness and renewal – the hallmarks of revival and spiritual awakening.

Genre

In narrative literature like Nehemiah, theology is taught through stories. While sometimes not overtly stated, the story makes the teaching clear: a return to the Word is, in effect, a return to the Lord, and the Scripture is God’s divine instrument for bringing about conviction, repentance, confession and renewal.

The Scriptures are Read: Nehemiah 8:1-4

Observe the setting for this event. Ezra is reading the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Old Testament). Through this reading, a new generation of Jews are learning of God, His covenant with them and their long history of disobedience to Him. From “early morning until midday” both the men and the women hear the Word. Those who can understand what is being read listen intently. Many of the listeners had grown up in Babylon where they had spoken only Aramaic. The Law of Moses was written in Hebrew so they had probably

What’s the Big Idea?

God’s Word is powerful and able to bring about the conviction, repentance and renewal of God’s people.

What’s the Problem?

Without hearing God’s Word we neither know His will nor are we inclined to do it.



never heard the Word of God read, at least not in a language they were familiar with. This is a significant moment as the people encounter God mediated through His Word.

Reverence: Nehemiah 8:5-8

Their response to the opening and reading of the book displays their reverence for God and His Word. Some seventy years earlier, as the prophets warned them of God's impending judgment, they all but ignored His Word. Now, as the book of the Law is opened, the people stand in respect and honor and then bless and worship God with their faces bowed to the ground – this is a major change in attitude toward God and His Word.

Conviction and Rejoicing: Nehemiah 8:9-12

As Ezra continues to read and explain the Law, the people break down, mourn and weep. They were hearing from Leviticus, Exodus, or Deuteronomy – that if they walk in God's ways, He will bless them; but if they turn from Him and His ways, He will curse them (see Deut. 28). They recognize that the reason their fathers had been taken into exile was their disobedience to God and that they, too, are guilty of unfaithfulness to Him. They begin to feel the weight of their sin and weep.

Having repented and turned from their sin, Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites encourage the people to rejoice and celebrate. They were not just turning from their sin but turning to the Lord, the source of joy. The goal of Scripture is not to produce conviction and guilt. It convicts us of sin with the goal of leading us to the Lord for forgiveness, grace, mercy and all of the blessings that are in Christ. In this passage the time of mourning has past and the time for renewal had begun.

Obedience: Nehemiah 8:13-18

In the seventh month, as leaders gathered together to continue learning from God's Word, they discover that each year, in the seventh month, Israel is supposed to celebrate the Feast of Booths (a commemoration of their wilderness wanderings). Since this is news to them, they had obviously not been performing the annual celebration. So, the leaders make a proclamation, and the people prepare to celebrate, demonstrating a renewed responsiveness and obedience to the Word of God.

Confession and Commitment: Nehemiah 9:1-10:39

This section is a bit long but it records how the people acknowledge their sin and the sin of their ancestors (9:1-37). Their ultimate response is to make a covenant, publicly, to live according to God's law (9:38-10:39).

They begin with a time of confession (9:1-4), continuing to listen to Scripture as they meet together “with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them.” This was a common cultural expression of remorse and grief. Then the leaders lead the people in worship as they review how God provided for their nation from the time of Abraham, even though their “fathers became stubborn and would not listen to His commandments” (9:16).

Because of God's history of faithfulness to Israel, they “agreed in writing” (9:38) to “take on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law...and to observe all the commandments” (10:29ff). This goes beyond simple obedience and seems to be an expression of yielding their entire lives over to God – to living under His lordship. The Nation of Israel was indeed revived.

What's Our Response?

You want your group to submit afresh to the redemptive work carried out by the Scripture in our lives.

What Are the Questions?

Nehemiah 8:1-10:39

LAUNCH

Can you think of a time when you realized that you were going the wrong direction (in school, life, a relationship) and needed to turn around completely and head the opposite direction?

EXPLORE

God used Nehemiah (and others) to bring His people back to the Promised Land to rebuild both the city and the people. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, the great task of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem was completed. The next task was to “rebuild” the people. Let’s look at how that happened.

Read [Nehemiah 8:1-12](#).

1. What books are included in the Law of Moses, and what are some of the recurring messages?
2. Why does Nehemiah comment on whether the people could understand or not?
3. In 8:6, the people bow to the ground in reverence and humility. What does it mean to humble yourself before God? What does it look like for you to do that?
4. What caused the people’s weeping?
5. Has the scripture ever struck you with unusual emotional force? When? Why?
6. What’s the difference between conviction and repentance?
7. Why do you think the people are told to stop mourning?
8. What does this explanation mean, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength”?

9. The gospel means “good news.” What was the good news in all of what they were hearing?

Read [Nehemiah 8:13-18](#).

10. What did they find written in the Law?
11. How would the feast of Booths have had special significance for them?
12. Have you found something in Scripture recently that you’ve never seen before? Was it because you were searching for something new or because God just chose to reveal something new to you?
13. In verse 15 they proclaim His Word everywhere. How have you seen your responsiveness to God’s word effect your willingness to share it?

Read [Nehemiah 9:1-38-10:28-39](#).

14. What does Nehemiah focus on in his sermon? Why?
15. Of all the commitments and reaffirmations they could have made, why do they focus on the things listed in the passage?
16. More than simply obeying a command, the Israelites bind themselves to the Lord to live their lives completely under His lordship. Is there a time you remember making such a lordship commitment? If so, when?

APPLY

17. In what ways have you noticed your heart being cold or calloused to God’s Word?
18. Is there any area in your life where you are less than open to God’s correction?
19. Where have you ceased to experience the joy of the Lord? What do you need to do to get back that joy?

What Are the Answers?

1. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. One theme is: if they walked in God's ways, He would bless them, but if they turned from Him, He would curse them.
2. Many of the listeners had grown up in Babylon where they had learned Aramaic. The Law of Moses was written in Hebrew.
3. To order ourselves under the Lord's hand. Submit ourselves to His Lordship.
4. Perhaps sorrow for their sin and rejection of God.
5. Allow the group to discuss.
6. Conviction is to feel the weight and guilt of sin. Repentance is to turn from it.
7. The goal of Scripture is not to produce conviction and guilt. It convicts us of sin with the goal of leading us to the Lord for forgiveness, grace and mercy.
8. It seems that it was a time of restoration and to celebrate God's goodness and grace.
9. That in turning to the Lord, He would forgive them and turn to them in grace.
10. They discovered that all Israel should celebrate the Feast of Booths in the seventh month.
11. It was a celebration that commemorated their wandering in the wilderness. As exiles they had just experienced a similar event.
12. Allow the group to discuss.
13. Allow the group to discuss.
14. God's faithfulness and the habitual rebellion of Israel.
15. These were the major ways that Israel had been unfaithful in the past.
16. Share.
17. Allow the group to discuss.
18. Discuss. Being vulnerable with your own life and struggles will help get the group sharing.
19. Allow the group to discuss.

Memorize

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.

Nehemiah 8:5-6