



“Spiritual Renewal”

Nehemiah 8

Idea: Spiritual renewal and vitality come through God’s Word, which forms the believer.

Intro: Yesterday, I left my 30s and entered my 40s. This spring, as time drew closer to this day, I found myself wrestling with the idea that my life, most likely, is at least half over. There is a good chance that I have more days behind me than in front of me. It is amazing how forty years have come and gone so quickly. All of this has been very sobering to me. It causes you to reflect on your life and ask a lot of questions.

Kara asked me the other day if I was going through a mid-life crisis. My answer was, “No.” But I guess in reality I am going through a mid-life crisis. Now, by the grace of God, I don’t think you’ll see me all of a sudden wearing a gold chain with my shirt unbuttoned, driving a convertible, or leaving my wife for a younger lady. No, there’s just a new reality that I am now on the backside of life, so I am thinking through how the later years can be better and more intentional than the early years. I am asking questions.

We all ask questions of life. Where did I come from? Why am I here? What difference am I making? One morning last week, I saw a young college student studying a textbook entitled, *Evolution: Making Sense of Life*. An entire intellectual discipline has been created for the sole purpose of answering the great questions of life. Unfortunately, Charles Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis generates more questions than it answers, and it makes no sense of life. There is a better source. The Bible says, "In the beginning God..."

God has spoken. Where would we be if God had not spoken? Where would you be if God had kept silent?

It's hard to imagine such a universal condition; it's difficult to conceive of such darkness, where even a glimmer of hope does not exist – to be conscious of a longing that cannot find relief; to be aware of an incompleteness for which there is no remedy. In such a place we could ask no questions, because there would be no answers.

But from the opening page of creation to the concluding promise of Christ's return, the Bible and the Christian faith conclude that God has indeed spoken and continues to speak. He alone is complete and undiminished. He alone is total beauty and terror. He alone determines reality. Who can contradict Him?

When Jesus stood before Pilate He said, "*For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice*" (John 18:37). The veracity of God's Word is the center around which life arranges itself.

Inquiry: Read Nehemiah 8.

As we have seen so far in the first seven chapters, Nehemiah's ambition was not simply to reconstruct the city's defenses but to revitalize a spiritual community. He wasn't seeking to resurrect a religious community. He desired to see his

countrymen experience a spiritual renewal in their lives. Nehemiah soon began to discover that reforming a community is a more exacting task than restoring its walls. He did understand that the only way for them to experience a spiritual renewal was for them to return to God's Word. Spiritual renewal and vitality come through God's Word, which forms the believer.

As soon as the building work came to an end, an unusual event took place, which was to prove dramatically influential in the spiritual life of God's people. The work was finished during the late summer month of Elul (6:15), and the next month, Tishri, marked the beginning of the year. The first day of the seventh month was a public holiday known as the Feast of Trumpets. So, only a few days after the completion of the wall, hundreds of men, women, and children gathered in Jerusalem for a new year celebration in which God's written Word played a central part. An outdoor public meeting was devoted entirely to hearing the reading and interpretation of Scripture.

Ezra and Nehemiah's work to reestablish faithfulness and holiness among the Jews cultivated a genuine desire for the Word of God that opened the door for spiritual renewal. Let's examine this desire, which led to renewal. We see first that it involves valuing God's Word.

I. Valuing God's Word (8:1-8)

The distinctive characteristics of this meeting for biblical exposition are strikingly relevant in our twenty-first century world. Our American, secular culture has become increasingly indifferent to the Bible. In 2017 LifeWay Research surveyed 1,000 Americans about their views of the Bible and found that while many have a positive view of it, most (53%) have read little to none of it.

The study revealed that 10% have never read any part of the Bible, and 13% have only read a few sentences. It also showed that men (39%) are more likely to skip Bible reading than women (31%).

A number of reasons keep Americans from reading the Bible, according to LifeWay Research. About a quarter (27%) say they don't prioritize it, while 15 percent don't have time. Thirteen percent say they've read it enough. Fewer say they don't read books (9%), don't see how the Bible relates to them (9%), or don't have a copy (6%). Ten percent disagree with what the Bible says.

This study reveals that we don't value God's Word in America, and I would add that the reason is because we don't value it in the church. Why should we ever expect to experience spiritual renewal if we never read our Bibles? We shouldn't. Paul said, "*Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (Rom 10:17).

16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.
– 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Christians who neglect the privilege and discipline of daily Bible reading are severing their links with vital spiritual resources. God speaks uniquely to us through His Word, and if we close our ears to this daily conversation we cannot hope to develop into mature believers. Those who attended this Jerusalem Bible study led by Ezra and Nehemiah valued God's Word, which was exemplified by six characteristics.

A. Unity in the Word (vs. 1)

Although these people were from different homes and different backgrounds within the city and beyond, they were driven by a common desire to hear the Word of God uniquely recorded in Scripture. They *gathered as one man*.

Satan's strategy is always to divide and conquer. He is always working to divide the church, so he strives to magnify our differences and minimize our similarities. One of the most powerful and unifying forces within the life of God's people is an insatiable appetite for the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word.

I am so thankful for the dozens of you who are reading the Bible chronologically together this year. God is increasing your love and faith. The discipline of reading God's Word each day is developing a greater appetite for it, and it binds you together with others who are growing in their affection for God and His Word.

B. Enthusiasm for the Word (vs. 1)

The most remarkable feature about the demand for Scripture at this meeting was that it appears to have been initiated by the people and not the leaders. When Ezra returned in 445BC, he set out to change the world by studying Scripture (Ezra 7:10). Therefore, when Nehemiah arrived in 458BC, the spiritual foundation for renewal had been laid through Ezra's thirteen years of preaching and teaching God's Word.

The people craved for God's Word as hungry people long for food. Throughout salvation history, one of the characteristics of genuine revival has been the sovereign initiative of God in giving men and women a longing for spiritual things. It is not

artificially promoted by religious leaders but initiated by God.

Where is this kind of enthusiasm for God's Word in the church today? Where is this kind of enthusiasm for God's Word in your personal life today? King David celebrated and delighted in God's Word (Ps 119:14,16). Do you? Are you enthusiastic about the reading, preaching, and teaching of God's Word?

C. Attentiveness to the Word (vs. 3)

Literally "the ears of all the people were to the Book of the Law." Nothing was going to distract them from the immense blessing they could receive from God's Word. The people clearly expected God to speak to them directly through the Word He had given to Moses centuries before. There was a vitality and urgency about their listening.

Is their vitality and urgency when you listen to God's Word? Do you expect to hear from God when you read the Bible devotionally? Do you expect to hear from God when you listen to the preaching of God in our worship services? Do you expect to hear from God when you study the Bible together in your small group?

D. Responsiveness to the Word (vs. 5-6)

From the beginning of their meeting, this eager congregation recognized that they were not listening to the words of Ezra but to the voice of God. What Moses had reverently and reliably written centuries before was God's unique Word to them, so when Ezra opened the book (vs. 5) the people, convinced of its authority, stood up. When Ezra blessed the Lord and gave thanks for His Word, the people lifted their hands and said, "*Amen, Amen*" (vs. 6).

The people made their own affirmation of commitment and loyalty audible by saying, “Yes, may it be so.” Ezra could lead them in worship, but his words would remain as a solitary expression of his personal devotion unless the people identified themselves with what he was saying on their behalf.

The account in these verses is largely descriptive rather than prescriptive. However, biblical exposition necessitates a personal response. For God’s Word to make any difference in our lives, we must apply what we have read and heard.

E. Submission to the Word (vs. 6)

The worshippers not only stood to the feet but fell to their knees. Recognizing that by His Word the living God was present among them, they had no greater desire than to fall before Him humbly, gratefully and adoringly. Seeking His face meant covering their own. It was the kneeling posture of a suppliant in desperate need of help, an indebted beggar gratefully acknowledging an undeserved gift, a servant who waits obediently in the presence of a beloved master.

The people did not bow in worship to the Scripture in and of itself. They bowed in worship and submission to the God the Scripture revealed. We don’t worship the Bible; we worship and submit ourselves to the God the Bible reveals.

Biblical exposition necessitates a personal response. We must respond in adoration and in submission.

F. Openness to the Word (vs. 8)

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the congregation understood that the Word of God given to Moses was not only applicable to the people to whom it was originally given; it was contemporary and relevant to them. It

speaks to every generation and to every person. For this reason, the Levites broke the congregation into smaller groups of people for the purpose of teaching the Word and bringing application to their lives.

We find within the people openness to the Word. They were teachable. They understood that there was still much to learn about themselves, life, and of course God. Good Jews knew the Word. They were taught it from childhood. They would have read through the Scriptures numerous times by adulthood, but they still were open to learn more.

How open are we today? How teachable are we today? Do you read and study God's Word with an openness for God to speak and reveal Himself, your sin, and areas that need His further sanctifying work?

Conclusion: Where would we be if God had not spoken? Where would you be if God had kept silent? We would not be here if God had not first said, "*Let there be.*" We would have no reason to gather in this building, no reason to sing songs of joy, and no hope for the future if Jesus on the cross had not said, "*It is finished.*"

But God has spoken, and He has spoken most clearly through the God the Son, Jesus Christ. And He alone has *the words of eternal life* (John 6:68). His presence and voice are what we seek. They are what bring spiritual renewal to our lives. Therefore, we would be wise to value God's Word that reveals Him to us.