



A Thirst for the Word

Nehemiah 8:1-9:3

Last time we saw how Ezra's expedition to Jerusalem found that even though there was a temple and worship, the leaders were not living according to the law. As a result of coming before God, they had hard choices to make about intermarrying with people from the nations around. They made a stand. As we wind the clock on 17 years we see the arrival of another Jew, called of God – Nehemiah. All the prophecies, prayers and expectations about the restoration of Jerusalem came to pass as Nehemiah came, with the full permission and authority of Artaxerxes to rebuild the walls and restore the city.

He got to the task of rebuilding the city and Nehemiah, because he had authority and the means, as well as being a spiritual man who trusted God, he was able to deal with the hostiles in neighbouring nations. He did a huge job quickly and efficiently in just 52 days – an astounding, miraculous job considering the size of the city. Remember that their predecessors took 14 years to get the temple rebuilt – a much smaller area. It must have been a huge undertaking, well organised and using a huge number of people. You've probably all heard plenty of sermons about the fact that if we are called by God and exercise faith, we see great things built for Him. That's exactly how it works – listen to His voice, obey His commands, then step forward in faith and see God's will fulfilled. Even though the enemies threatened, they just never came. And the city was secured.

And the product of that was Nehemiah 8. The people understood the enormity of the completed work – the culmination of over a century of return: the product of a deepening of their spiritual life and they wanted to respond to God. The response was rapid. The rebuilding was complete in the month of Elul and everyone went home but they were back on the first of Tishri to worship as it was the first day of Sukkot or Tabernacles to worship God and celebrate His goodness to them. The response to God was quite extraordinary and grass roots.

They called for God's word to be read – a communal act of worship. They determined the place and time, they booked Ezra and made sure that he had a suitable platform to preach from. **They** demanded that **he** to do it. Until then it had been the other way around – he had come from Babylonia to teach them. And then *there in the square by the gate he read the Law to them from dawn until noon, and they all listened attentively.* Amazing. How long have you ever listened a sermon for? These people hungered for God's word so much that they spent all morning listening to the Torah being read.

They responded to the word as they began to understand it. The scribes read the Torah and explained it (they needed to as the text was in Hebrew but they spoke Aramaic. As they heard it we also see their response. *9 When the people heard what the Law required, they were so moved that they began to cry. So Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law, and the Levites who were explaining the Law told all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God, so you are not to mourn or cry. 10 Now go home and have a feast. Share your food and wine with those who haven't enough. Today is holy to our Lord, so don't be sad. The joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong."* The people had understood God's requirements for them and they realised how short they had fallen from them. One obvious thing that seems to have come out of it was that in the 80 years they had been back out of exile, they had never celebrated one of the most basic Jewish festivals, Tabernacles, or Sukkot/Succoth as Jews know it. It was a basic festival and they had missed it for whatever reason.

And it led them to tears and mourning. When was the last time that our realisation of sin led us to tears? When we got caught? One characteristic mark of revival is when God's people meet together to worship and

together mourn their failure inadequacy before God. It's at that point of brokenness that God can rebuild us. What's interesting is that the people came to this repentance as the result of a high point in their life together, not a low point like the exile had been.

They worshipped God together And that was the whole issue. God had blessed them as a nation *despite* of who they were! It is a wonderful truth that we have a God who loves us and seeks to bless us despite our failings. And as we come in repentance to Him, we find that joy and praise coming from inside us. *The joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong.* *The joy of the lord is our strength.* Another feature of revival is that with confession comes joy as we understand we have a God of grace. That was the experience of that day and the people went off and celebrated Sukkot in that knowledge.

We are at the Lord's table this evening. We have come to celebrate God's love and grace to us as we remember Jesus; His body broken and blood shed. How do we come? We come pleading only our sinfulness and God's grace. And we shall do that in a moment. But as we understand just the extent of God's grace then we exclaim *The joy of the lord is our strength.*

So how can I sum up this event? The whole emphasis of this story is that the impetus to hear and understand God's word did not come from Ezra or Nehemiah. Both were religious patriots. Ezra had been plugging away for 18 years. We know nothing of his activities other than that he led and taught. That was it.

The Lord sends Nehemiah and the people rebuild the city. They see the miracle and then the whole thing comes from them. As Baptists we often attribute much to leaders. To some extent that's true. Churches can stand and fall on the quality of leaders. But the real difference happened when the people themselves responded to what God was doing and **demand**ed that Ezra taught them. They provided the time, the place and the platform and they were there lapping it up. They responded together both in repentance and in worship.

Our desire is, or should be to see God glorified in this neighbourhood, to see people coming to Christ and that He should build His church in Walton – more precisely *our vision is to help people follow Jesus and serve Walton in Jesus' name.* My task as Pastor is to teach and lead towards those goals. One thing I learned early as a student Minister was that it doesn't matter how many words I may speak, people often respond to them in ways I never intended. There are those that are entertained by what I say, but somehow only remember the pictures or the humour. There are those that seek to theologically pick at what has been presented to them and miss the point completely. There are those that believe that the message God has given me applies to others in the congregation. There are those that are so fixed in the ways that it doesn't matter what I say, they'll always think I've said something else and their prejudices will be reinforced.

Ezra taught for 18 years faithfully. All we have to show for it is a 17 years silence between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1. I'm sure plenty of things happened, plenty of sermons preached, lots of worship activity; but it was hardly revival. The nation trundled on and Ezra faithfully preached the word.

Then God moved and the people were changed from being a load of people to trundled along from one year to the next into being a people who were up for having God's word opened to them by Ezra and responding with tears and joy to what they heard.

It wasn't for lack of preaching. Ezra and his people had taught and preached the Torah for nearly two decades. The people had heard it before. Some commentators suggest that perhaps they had not heard some of Numbers or Deuteronomy before - perhaps the scrolls for part of the Torah had only just come to light. We aren't really told anything about that. Clearly their non-observance of Sukkot indicates that something fundamental had been missed up to this point.

So what was the difference – the power of God. They had seen God work and the difference was made – there was a nation in revival.

What do we learn? Firstly we can't manufacture a move of God's Spirit. The Spirit blows where He will. He produces the spark that lights the fire. But we can know the circumstances under which that usually happens. The message for me and to the other leaders is to remain faithful in what is taught – to teach God's word. To encourage holy living. To speak of the blessings of obedience to Christ.

Secondly, the message for those of us whose hearts God has opened (and I would hope that would be all here) is to persevere. God is not a God of quick fixes. Experience such as this one here indicates that He is a grower of mighty oaks and cedars, which take a long time to grow, but turn into mighty forests, rather than mushrooms which spring up quickly and disappear just as fast. Keep faithfully serving, keep faithfully expecting God to do great things. Remain expectant. Look for the men and women that God is raising up to do something new. Encourage them, nurture them, protect them, support them.

The result is that God works in His time and produces the fruit in those that are faithful to Him. And the fruit of decades of perseverance, hard choices, difficulties as people caught the vision of a restored Jerusalem, was a city restored, an economy reconstructed, a land repopulated and a people brought back to God. Let's allow Him to do that in our land, in our neighbourhood and in our Church.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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1 By the seventh month the people of Israel were all settled in their towns. On the first day of that month they all assembled in Jerusalem, in the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law which the Lord had given Israel through Moses, to get the book of the Law. 2 So Ezra brought it to the place where the people had gathered — men, women, and the children who were old enough to understand. 3 There in the square by the gate he read the Law to them from dawn until noon, and they all listened attentively.

4 Ezra was standing on a wooden platform that had been built for the occasion. The following men stood at his right: Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah; and the following stood at his left: Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

5 As Ezra stood there on the platform high above the people, they all kept their eyes fixed on him. As soon as he opened the book, they all stood up.

6 Ezra said, "Praise the Lord, the great God!" All the people raised their arms in the air and answered, "Amen! Amen!" They knelt in worship, with their faces to the ground. 7 Then they rose and stood in their places, and the following Levites explained the Law to them: Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah. 8 They gave an oral translation of God's Law and explained it so that the people could understand it.

9 When the people heard what the Law required, they were so moved that they began to cry. So Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law, and the Levites who were explaining the Law told all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God, so you are not to mourn or cry. 10 Now go home and have a feast. Share your food and wine with those who haven't enough. Today is holy to our Lord, so don't be sad. The joy that the Lord gives you will make you strong."

11 The Levites went about calming the people and telling them not to be sad on such a holy day. 12 So all the people went home and ate and drank joyfully and shared what they had with others, because they understood what had been read to them. 13 The next day the heads of the clans, together with the priests and the Levites, went to Ezra to study the teachings of the Law. 14 They discovered that the Law, which the LORD gave through Moses, ordered the people of Israel to live in temporary shelters during the Festival of Shelters. 15 So they gave the following instructions and sent them all through Jerusalem and the other cities and towns: "Go out to the hills and get branches from pines, olives, myrtles, palms, and other trees to make shelters according to the instructions written in the Law." 16 So the people got branches and built shelters on the flat roofs of their houses, in their yards, in the Temple courtyard, and in the public squares by the Water Gate and by the Ephraim Gate. 17 All the people who had come back from captivity built shelters and lived in them. This was the first time it had been done since the days of Joshua son of Nun, and everybody was excited and happy. 18 From the first day of the festival to the last they read a part of God's Law every day. They celebrated for seven days, and on the eighth day there was a closing ceremony, as required in the Law. 9:1 On the twenty-fourth day of the same month the people of Israel gathered to fast in order to show sorrow for their sins. They had already separated themselves from all foreigners. They wore sackcloth and put dust on their heads as signs of grief. Then they stood and began to confess the sins that they and their ancestors had committed. 2 3 For about three hours the Law of the LORD their God was read to them, and for the next three hours they confessed their sins and worshipped the LORD their God.