



I became a Christian in 1974 at the tail end of what has come to be called the Jesus Movement. I didn't know it was a movement. I just knew I'd had a life transforming encounter with Jesus. A week later someone brought me to a "Body Life" service at Peninsula Bible Church where I discovered hundreds of other young people who'd had the same experience as me. The place was packed. There was excitement in the air. There was a joy and love and great music being created and written. People were eager to meet one another's needs. It was like we'd all experienced the same thing and now we found each other and it was electric.

Church historians would call this a time of "revival" or "awakening." These are special times in history when God moves in powerful and dramatic ways. It's like the ordinary operations of the Holy Spirit are intensified. "Sleepy" believers are awakened through joyful repentance and put Christ at the center of their lives. Nominal Christians get converted. Non-believers drawn in begin embracing Christ in numbers that defy explanation. None of this can be accounted for by efficient church programs or demographic shifts. The corporate worship gatherings are thick with a sense of the presence of God not orchestrated by the leaders. The Jesus Movement only lasted about five years, but the ripple effect of that continues today. In fact this very church was built in the later 60's out of the overflow of that movement.

Something similar took place in Nehemiah's day. Nehemiah's first concern when he arrived in Jerusalem was to rebuild the walls around the city so it was defensible. He mobilized the people of Jerusalem and the walls were rebuilt in just 52 days. But then he turned his attention to another more important task. He knew it wasn't just about the wall; it was about the people. So he began to focus on rebuilding the people of God. First he had to repopulate the city, but even that wasn't enough. Not only were the walls useless but so were the people unless they were alive to God. For some time there'd been a spiritual vacuum in the city. They lacked the kind of unquenchable faith, joy and love God intended his people to know. They'd fallen into compromise in their walk with him. You couldn't tell them apart from the world around them. If there was ever a need for revival it was then and there. And that's what happened. God visited his people in a very powerful way.

Nehemiah 8–10 is about a revival. It's a story that teaches us what to expect when the Spirit moves in reviving power. It's important to know we can't reproduce a revival like this just by doing what they did. Revival is always a supernatural work of God; not manufactured by us. But those who study revivals recognize there's a pattern in how they come about and what they

look like. Someone has said we can't make it rain but we can dig the channels so when the rain comes there's someplace for it to flow. We can't make the Spirit come in reviving power, but we can dig channels so we're ready when it happens. As we study this, we're going to see what some of those channels are and become more equipped to cooperate with God's Spirit in this work. We're going to focus on chapter 8 and dip into chapters 9 and 10 as we go along.

The Mind is Illumined

Let's begin by reading verses 1–8.

... 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.

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 day-break 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.

Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriaiah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishaiah, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

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.

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.

The start of the seventh month was an important time in the Jewish calendar. The first day of the seventh month was considered New Year's Day. This was a holy day where the Jews rested from their work and made offerings to the Lord and watched

lots of football! So all the people gathered at the Water Gate and asked Ezra to read the book of the Law, which was the first five books of the Old Testament.

This is the first time we see Ezra in this book. He's a teacher and a priest. He's been in Jerusalem for about 13 years, long before Nehemiah had arrived. Nehemiah fades into the background and Ezra is now center stage. He's devoted to the word of God. Nehemiah isn't a priest; he's an administrator; a politician. And he knows his limitations and he's willing now to take a back seat to this scholar-teacher named Ezra.

It's interesting we heard nothing of Ezra while the walls were being built. What was he doing? Most likely he was faithfully and quietly studying the word of God, seeking to flesh it out in his own life. If we go back to the book of the Bible that bears his name, it says of him, "*Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel*" (Ezra 7:10). That's the kind of man he was. I'm sure he was also praying. We know from his book he was a man of prayer. For 13 years he'd agonized over the low state of their spiritual lives and prayed for revival. When revival hits, there's always been a remnant who've been quietly praying for years, preparing the soil.

Ezra takes the book of the Law, stands on a podium so people can hear him, and after a brief time of worship he reads the book from dawn until noon. That's a long time to read, especially considering even children old enough to understand were there. This reading was periodically broken up by translation and explanation given by the Levites. The Law was written in Hebrew and many of these Jews hadn't learned Hebrew. For years they'd been speaking the Aramaic language of the people around them, so they needed translation. They were also ignorant of God's Word so they needed to have it explained. Ezra would read a portion and then the Levites, stationed at various places in the crowd, translated and explained it. This went for about six hours.

Notice the hunger of the people. They take the initiative in this whole thing. It says "all the people came together as one," as if it were a spontaneous meeting put together not by the leaders but the people. "They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring the book..." They want to hear what God's word has to say. They're like an impatient audience at a rock concert, chanting "We want Ezra" over and over, louder and louder. Repeatedly, it says these things weren't done just by a few spiritually minded people but by "all the people." How do you explain this hunger? God's Spirit was working on their hearts, giving them a hunger for him and a desire to please him. When God moves in revival, he often begins by creating a hunger for the things of God. We must become dissatisfied with things as they are, and come to grips with the shallowness of our spiritual life.

These people aren't there just to be entertained or humored. They stand and listen to Ezra for six hours. That's hard work. They stand as a sign of respect when the Bible is read. They show humility by bowing low and worshipping with their faces to the ground. This is how to approach the teaching of the Word. Notice

also Ezra "stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion." They made sure the Word was lifted up and all could hear. Ezra read from it while the Levites were translating, explaining, and applying the Word. When God moves in revival, he uses the exposition of the Word of God, where it's systematically read and explained. This is why we're committed to teaching the Word of God here at CPC. This is why we don't do 20-minute-feel-good topical sermons. This is why we don't determine what to preach based purely on felt needs. We open the Bible and teach, verse by verse, paragraph by paragraph, book by book. This ensures we get a balanced diet from the Word, and it protects us from harping only on the issues we feel deeply about. As we begin to understand God's Word our false perceptions about life are exposed; we begin to see things as they really are, and that changes how we live.

Notice also there's a great emphasis on the "understanding" of the people. The Word was taught to promote understanding. Exposition ought to make the Scripture clear; to present it in language we can understand; and then to apply it to situations we face in real life. Through that our minds are opened up. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 3, "*We have the mind of Christ.*" A person can teach the Word, but only the Spirit can open the mind to the truth. And when this happens it's the most exciting thing in the world. Have you ever listened to God's Word being taught and suddenly you realize he's speaking to you?

We sometimes downplay the importance of the mind in changing a life, but no real change can come about unless our thinking is changed. There's a tremendous ignorance of the Scripture in most of our churches today. Some of us have been taught we really can't trust the Bible in its entirety. Some of us have bought into the lie our culture feeds us that only a small smattering of knowledge about anything is needed today and leave the technical stuff to the professionals. But all this leads to an ignorance of God's Word, which in turn leads to spiritual apathy and inertia.

So the first step in revival is the illumination of the mind through the exposition of the Word. The second part of the pattern for revival we see in this story is that the heart is moved.

The Heart is Moved

Look at verses 9–12.

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.

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.

When the mind is opened up the heart is often moved; there's an emotional reaction that's again born of the Spirit of God. Notice the strong emotions in this story. First, there's grief. As the Word sinks in, the people begin to weep out of conviction of sin. This is understandable; they'd lived in disobedience to the Word for some time and they're overcome with a sense of the reality of sin.

We preachers usually think if we can get some folks to cry we're doing our job! We like tears; it means somebody's paying attention; someone's taking us seriously. But not Ezra. He and the other leaders went out and tried to get them to stop weeping and start rejoicing. This is the second emotion we see here—joy. Three times they say the same thing: "You're not supposed to be crying, you're supposed to be rejoicing. Why? Because this day is holy to our Lord." They're saying this day is set apart by God for rejoicing, not weeping, so what you're doing is inappropriate. It's like a child getting up on Christmas morning, walking out into the living room where all the gifts are, and crying. It doesn't fit. So these leaders tell the people to go home and have a feast, a party ("Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks..."). Nehemiah even gets in on the act and says, "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." What a great line! The joy that comes from knowing who the Lord is and what he's done for us is the source of our strength.

None of this is meant to downplay the importance of grieving and mourning over our sin. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn." In fact, Nehemiah 9 is a corporate prayer of confession, which takes place a few weeks later. It says, "*On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads... They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors*" (9:1-2). Starting in v. 5 all the way to the end of the chapter they confess their sins. In doing so, they recount their story as a nation and specifically two recurring themes: Israel's persistent rebellion and God's persistent faithfulness. And God's faithfulness gets a lot more ink than Israel's stubbornness. Listen to some of these lines from the prayer:

"But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them..." (v. 17b).

"Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness" (v. 19a).

"But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers..." (v. 27b).

You see, even with a knowledge of our own rebellion, there comes a time when our weeping ought to turn into rejoicing. Why? Because of his great compassion. If we understand who

God is and what he's done for us in Christ, our weeping will turn to joy. Grief over sin and joy over God's grace are never far from each other. Why are so many Christians joyless? Why do we think God is more pleased with our weeping than our rejoicing? Why do we think God is some kind of cosmic killjoy? Like the bumper sticker that says, "God is back and boy is he mad." But the essence of authentic Christianity isn't weeping but rejoicing. It's the kind of joy that doesn't change with circumstances because it's anchored in the Lord who never changes. "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

Of all people, as those who possess the riches of Christ, we should be filled with joy. Imagine you're a billionaire and you have three \$10 bills in your wallet. You go to a Starbucks and buy a tall coffee and you hand the person one of the bills to pay for a cup of coffee that cost \$1.95. He hands you the change and you put it in your pocket. Later in the day you look in and find out there's only one \$10 bill there and you say, "Either I dropped a \$10 bill somewhere, or I gave the guy at Starbucks two bills." What will you do? Will you get upset? Will you go to the police and demand they question the barista? No, you'll shrug it off. You're a billionaire. You lost \$10. So what? You're too rich to be concerned about it.

This week, somebody criticized you. Something you bought or invested in turned out to be less valuable than you thought. Something you wanted to happen didn't go the way you wanted. These are real losses. But if you're a Christian, what will you do? Will that disrupt your joy? Will you shake your fist at God? Toss and turn at night? If so, that's because you don't know how rich you are. If you're that upset about your status with others, if you're constantly lashing out at people who hurt your feelings, you've lost touch with your identity and the joy that goes with that. That's why Jesus said, "*Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy*" (John 16:22). You see, no one can take away our joy because as those who belong to Christ we're spiritual billionaires. Why wring our hands over \$10?

The Will is Submitted

But that's not the end of the story. We've talked about our head. We've talked about our heart. Now let's talk about our will. Look at verses 13-18.

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 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.

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.

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

A group of leaders come to Ezra the next day for a small group bible study. They want to take a closer look at this book and, as they do, they discover an ancient commandment in the law telling them to hold a special celebration during the seventh month called the Feast of Booths (tabernacles). God had told his people each year on the fifteenth day of the seventh month to hold a week long celebration remembering how he'd brought the Jews through the wilderness and miraculously provided food and water for them. During that time they'd lived in tents made out of tree branches and leaves. God wanted all the Jews to come to Jerusalem every year and make these tents and live in them for a week to remember his provision. This is a little bit like a week-long camping trip. Camping is fun; it's hard work, but it's fun.

The Jews neglected this commandment for years and so out of obedience to God they decide to celebrate this holiday again. The next 13 days are spent in preparation. Can you imagine what this looked like to the surrounding people? And so, when the fifteenth comes they're ready and celebrate the Feast for a week. Everybody is involved. No one says, "I'm not doing that." It's a time of great joy and Ezra continues to read from the book of the law each day of the feast.

In genuine revival, not only is the mind opened and the heart moved but the will is submitted. Few people know this but it was a revival called the Second Great Awakening in our country that led to the abolition of slavery. It also led to prison reform and a concern for the poor. The Red Cross came as a result of that Awakening, as did the YMCA. One historian says, "By the mid eighteenth hundreds it was an accepted fact of evangelicalism that spiritual renewal would result in an effort to help the less fortunate in the community." There's a connection between revival and obedience. If your mind is informed and your heart is moved, but it doesn't result in your will being submitted, what good is it? If the Lord touches you here, that needs to change what you do out there. When the Spirit of God moves in our lives, he cleans house in our lives.

Over in chapter 10 the people actually make a formal written agreement to do just that. If you read this agreement you'll see they specifically commit to obeying God in three areas. First, in who they marry.

"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons" (v. 30).

Second, in observing the Sabbath.

"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts" (v. 31).

And third, in giving generously for the proper functioning of the house of God.

"We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God:" (v. 32).

In keeping with that, at the end of the chapter they say,

"We will not neglect the house of our God" (v. 39b).

There's a commitment to be obedient in three very important areas of our life: our love life, our work life, and our financial life. If you're wondering where to start in cleaning your own house, start with those three things.

There are the three elements in revival: the mind is opened up to the awesome realities of God, the heart is moved deeply, and finally the will is submitted. It always involves all three things. When we leave one out we get in trouble. When the mind is informed without the heart being moved we fall into dry, dead intellectualism. When the heart is moved apart from the mind being informed by the Word we fall into emotionalism. And when the will is submitted without either two other things we fall into legalism.

So let me encourage you to evaluate yourself based on these three things. Again, we can't make it rain but we can dig the channels so when the rain comes there's someplace for it to flow. We can't make the Spirit come in reviving power, but we can dig these channels so we're ready when it happens.

- Is your mind being illumined by God's Word? Are you in the Word? Is your mind engaged?
- Is your heart being moved by God's compassion and faithfulness? Is the joy of the Lord your strength?
- Is your will submitted? What are the areas you know need to change? Your love life? Your work life? Your finances? Will you confess that to him and ask him to give you the strength you need to obey?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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