

Turning Things Around Like Nehemiah

When I took our young people in our confirmation class on a field trip a couple of years ago one stop was at Old St. George's United Methodist Church in Philadelphia. It's the oldest continually active United Methodist Church in the world. There's a lot of our history there and it's really worth going to see. They took the kids on a tour and talked about how things were done when the church started about 250 years ago.

I think the kids were a bit surprised to find out that back then worship services were almost three hour long, that they sang many more songs with more verses than we do, and that there were often two sermons - a half hour one and then a minimum one-hour message by the senior pastor.

They were required to go to small group meetings during the week where they learned more about the scriptures and spent time in self-examination. The amount of teaching they experienced and the reinforcement of that teaching they practiced each week was one of several reasons why we were the fastest growing movement in the world at that time.

But even they would have been floored by the remarkable situation Nehemiah tells us about in Nehemiah 8: a service that had about six hours of Bible reading and then a full day of preaching - all at the people's request, during which they remained standing the entire time! And not only that, they came back the next day for more of the same!

In our terms we might call it a revival or spiritual renewal. For the first time in many decades people really heard the scriptures read and taught and the word taught in clear, practical terms about what they actually needed to do about it... and that was a turning-point in history for God's people.

From this point on they would be a people of the book. The reading of the scriptures became central that day and that has endured and never completely lost since then. There have been times when it faded a bit and became less vital, but it always came back. The scrolls have never been put away.

As Christians we DID lose this focus on the scriptures for several centuries - at least for the lay people. Monks in religious communities studied, but the laity and even most clergy were pretty ignorant of the scriptures - particularly since you had to read Latin or Greek AND Hebrew to read them. That was one of the causes of the Protestant Reformation - a return to a focus on the scriptures and access to them for lay folk. That focus began on this pivotal day we're looking at today when Nehemiah had the word of God read and taught.

And always, throughout history, a strong emphasis on God's Word has been a primary mark of times of spiritual renewal and revival. As I said, God's people have gone through cycles where God's Word has been neglected and when that happens, the spiritual health of God's people deteriorates. Periodically God send leaders - the Nehemiah's of their times - to create renewal, revival and revitalization. Always, one of the main marks of that renewal is a renewed emphasis on people learning God's Word.

Well before Nehemiah's time something similar happened in the Old Testament, when God's people lived under the reigns of King Manasseh and his son, Amon.

Manasseh reversed the work of his father Hezekiah, re-established local shrines, allowed polytheistic worship of Baal, and Asherah in the Temple and promoted an Assyrian cult. He even participated in the cult of Moloch that practiced sacrificing young children. Under Manasseh and Amon popular worship became a blend of cults.

Amon's son, Josiah, changed this. He began to seek the Lord when he was 16 and he instituted spiritual reforms. Then Hilkiah the priest found a copy of God's law and Josiah called the nation to repentance. Revival broke out among God's people because God's Word was taught and obeyed.

The same thing happened during the Reformation, which was, at its center, a revival of God's Word. The Church had neglected the Word. Priests were the only ones with access to it, and most of them were ignorant of its contents. John Wycliffe and William Tyndale worked to translate God's word into common English. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. John Calvin preached sermons, explaining and applying the Word to the lives of the people. The Reformation's focus renewed God's people.

The same thing happened with the Puritan revivals and particularly with the Wesleyan revival - the movement that we are a part of. Wesley and both the English speaking and German speaking parts of the movement focused on taking the Word of God into the community, both through taking it to people and through living it out in caring ministry to people.

Nehemiah's story is the prime example of how this works in the lives of God's people. Nehemiah 8 shows marks of spiritual renewal that come through God's Word. Those benchmarks are what we're going to look at today.

For spiritual renewal, God's people **1. Must Hear and Learn the Scriptures.** Nehemiah 8:1 says, *"...all the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given for Israel to obey."* The people gathered and asked them to read the book of the Law. It was read publicly for six hours and the people listened carefully honoring the fact that God had given as God's authoritative word to them.

Copies of the Law would have been very rare, and with the temple torn down and the priests gone underground, most people had never heard it in their lifetime. They'd have heard some of the stories and be aware of them, like people today are aware of Noah and of Moses, even if they've never opened a Bible or gone to church at any time in their life. It's similar to the early church when most of those becoming believers were people with little knowledge of the faith or of the scriptures, so Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13 to *"...focus on reading the Scriptures to the church, encouraging the believers, and teaching them."*

Until the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, the scriptures had to be copied by hand, and often there would only be one copy in a city, often chained to the pulpit. Since most people were illiterate, the Bible had to be read publicly for them to know what it says.

Now, we live in a culture where almost all of us know how to read. We have multiple translations of the Bible in our language and Bibles are easily gotten. And yet most American Christians spend far more time entertaining ourselves than we do reading and studying what God has given us in the Bible.

For spiritual renewal, God's people **2. Must Have God's Word Made Clear.** Having ears that work doesn't guarantee that we really hear what's written. Having eyes that see, doesn't guarantee that we read the meaning that's meant for us. Sometimes we hear it, but we don't really listen to what's being said, even if we hear the sounds of the words. We've all had that experience. Someone is talking to you, but you're distracted or doing something else and you didn't really hear what they said. It's more than just possible to hear the Bible read or preached and not hear a thing, because your mind is elsewhere.

In Mark 4:9 Jesus said, *"Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand."* In Luke 8:18 he said, *"So pay attention to how you hear. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what they think they understand will be taken away from them."* If the Bible contains the very words of God, then it certainly is in our best interest to listen!

The people in Jerusalem that day were both attentive and respectful when God's Word was read to them. Nehemiah 8:2-6 says, *"Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law. Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet. Then Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people chanted, 'Amen! Amen!' as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground."*

When we respect someone, we tend to pay more attention to them. If we respect God and recognize that God is speaking to us through the scriptures, we'll pay attention. If we forget that this is the Word of the living God to us, our minds will wander to other things. I realize that we preachers can sometimes be boring. That's why I use a lot of scriptures in my sermons. So if you find your attention wandering, direct your mind to Scripture texts.

Spiritual renewal comes through listening to God's Word when it is read and preached and also when it is taught.

Nehemiah 8:7-8 says, *"The Levites - Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah - then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage."* These guys on the platform with Ezra explained the law to the people. They were teachers who made the meaning of Scripture clear.

Many parts of the Bible are fairly plain to anyone who can read. Mark Twain is reputed to have said, that it's not the sections of the Bible that he couldn't understand that bothered him. It was the parts that he could understand! A lot of the Bible is just straight-forward clear about what we should be doing and no amount of reinterpretation changes that. But there are some sections that are difficult to grasp and so God has given the church pastors and teachers to help people understand and apply the scriptures to their lives.

To accurately apply the Bible, you need to accurately interpret it. To accurately interpret it, you need to understand what it meant when it was written - you need to know the context of its time. Also, since the Bible fits together as a unified whole, you need to look at it in the context of everything that the Bible teaches about that particular subject. Sometimes all of this requires historical research to discover the customs and historical events related to the biblical text. Sometimes it requires either knowing the original biblical language or checking the work of scholars who do. If you take a text out of its context, you can make the Bible say just about anything you wish! That's dangerous.

This isn't some new issue. Taking things out of context was a problem even in the early church. In 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter says, *"...our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him - speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction."* People were already reinterpreting Paul and trying to change what he had written, so Peter was already teaching to correct that and make Paul's writings clear.

This has continued through history. The reformation was all about making the Scriptures clear to people and available to people. For centuries, only highly educated people were able to read the Bible or even taught it. Martin Luther wanted to change that and condemned preachers who only aimed their preaching at the spiritually mature and knowledgeable people in the church. He had dozens of doctors and magistrates and highly educated people in his church, but when he preached he spoke to the young people, the inexperienced people, and the servants who had little schooling but were attending. If the more educated people weren't impressed, Luther actually said, "The door is open; let them be gone!"

John Wesley also worked to bring clear teaching to people who had been ignored. The Wesleyan revivals worked to restore the Bible to having a central position in faith - something that had been lost in that century. But when Wesley preached, he was aiming at people making a decision and taking action. He pressed the text home for an immediate response. He was looking for spiritual revitalization in the people he spoke to - a revitalization that would lead to major change in lives and Christian action that would change the surrounding community and culture.

Which brings us to our last point - For spiritual renewal, **God's people 3. Must Respond to the Scriptures with Their Lives.** Knowledge alone is never, ever enough. In fact, it's spiritually dangerous to study the Bible without the goal of a loving and obedient response. In 1 Corinthians 8:1-3 Paul says about a particular issue people were talking about at that time, *"...we know that 'we all have knowledge' about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes."* Knowledge by itself isn't the goal and it's not enough. There are a lot of people who think that their knowledge makes them more important than other believers, but many of them have that knowledge without the right attitude. Knowledge is a good thing, if and only if it works to make the person more like Jesus and builds up the family of God in love.

Let's look at some of what happened when the people heard God's word proclaimed and explained. Nehemiah 8:9-14, 16-17 says, *"Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, 'Don't mourn or weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God.' For the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. And Nehemiah continued, 'Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!' And the Levites, too, quieted the people, telling them, 'Hush! Don't weep! For this is a sacred day.' So the people went away to eat and drink at a festive meal, to share gifts of food, and to celebrate with great joy because they had heard God's words and understood them. On October 9 the family leaders of all the people, together with the priests and Levites, met with Ezra the scribe to go over the Law in greater detail. As they studied the Law, they discovered that the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should live in shelters during the festival to be held that month. So the people went out and cut branches and used them to build shelters on the roofs of their houses, in their courtyards, in the courtyards of God's Temple, or in the squares just inside the Water Gate and the Ephraim Gate. So everyone who had returned from captivity lived in these shelters during the festival, and they were all filled with great joy! The Israelites had not celebrated like this since the days of Joshua son of Nun."*

So their immediate response actually was to cry. Why were the people crying? Because once they heard and understood God's Word, they realized how much they had not been doing; they realized how much they had drifted from the right practice of people who follow God's word. In chapter 9 - that we won't be covering in detail - the whole city repents and recommits to following faithfully. The fact is, the more the light of God's Word shines in our hearts, the more we see where we don't live up to that light. If you think you've made it, it's because your vision isn't all that clear. If you were seeing things rightly, you'd know how far you still have to go.

But the leaders told the people to stop crying and instead celebrate that they have a clearer vision of who God is and what God is calling us to. Yes, we fall short and we need to acknowledge that and repent, but praise God! We have God in our lives and God's Word to guide us!

Next, the people learned something particular that they had been neglecting. The people heard in the reading of the Law that they should have been observing Sukkot; the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. Jesus participated in this same festival centuries later, because after it was rediscovered on this day it was practiced from then on. All but the first few verses of the 7th chapter of John take place during this same festival and it's a very important occasion for teaching by Jesus. When people asked him about his teaching he said, *"My message is not my own; it comes from God who sent me. Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own. Those who speak for themselves want glory only for themselves, but a person who seeks to honor the one who sent him speaks truth, not lies. Moses gave you the law, but none of you obeys it!"*

What an appropriate teaching for the festival that had been brought back into practice by people realizing that they had been failing to obey the law that Moses had given them! This festival should have reminded them of the danger of losing their devotion as a people.

When Nehemiah and the people rediscovered the celebration, the time for it was only two weeks away, the leaders immediately had the people make preparations for it. This feast celebrated both the harvest that God provides and the deliverance that God gave God's people from captivity. For a week the people lived in tents to remember when God's people lived in temporary shelters in the wilderness. The end of Joshua's time was the year 1375 and this festival in Nehemiah's time is in 445. Since it says that this festival, *"...had not celebrated like this since the days of Joshua..."* they had neglected this festival for over 900 years.

The Feast of Booths lasted a week, and every day included feasting, worship, celebration, and more reading of God's law, and it ended with a formal ceremony on the final day. As the people camped in the temporary shelters, they reflected back on God's faithfulness to God's people, in spite of their sins. It was a festival of thanksgiving, gratitude and love toward God for God's grace.

The restoring of this festival became for those people the sign of a renewal of faith. They were revitalized and the reason was that they heard and learned from clear teaching of the Scriptures, they took it seriously, and they were willing to change. They responded to the Scriptures with their lives

Chuck Swindoll in his book *Hand Me Another Brick* tells about a time when he spoke at a family-ministry conference. There was a couple with several small children. It was evident that they were miserable for some reason. It turned out that the possibility of divorce was in the back of their minds.

But as the week progressed, he saw that couple change as they listened to God's Word taught. At the end of the week, this couple came up to Swindoll and said, "We want you to know that this week has been a 180-degree turnaround experience for us. When we came, we were ready to separate. We're going back stronger than we have ever been in our marriage."

But at the same conference with the same speakers, teaching, surroundings, and schedule, there was another couple. The husband was turned off by everything. He attended a few sessions, but became so disturbed that he went home. His family left hurting - even more than they had been when they came.

What was the difference? Attitude. The couple who benefited had teachable hearts. The other man did not.

That made the difference during Nehemiah's time as well. The difference was that the people listened and took what they were being taught seriously and they responded; it changed them. They didn't respond with indignation that they were being told that what they had always done wasn't enough. They accepted what they were taught and they responded; they took action.

Some people come to church and respond to God's Word. They grow from the teaching. They don't balk at being told that they need to change. They accept it. They realize that hearing the scripture and teaching all by itself is a call from God to change their lives and take action.

Others come to the same service and they don't want to deal with it. They are turned off by the very same message that helps others to grow. If you want spiritual renewal, check your attitude; check your heart. Revitalization comes when responsive hearts hear God's Word clearly proclaimed, listen, and respond to what God is **telling them.**