

Revival: A Sermon

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Let's pray: Lord, thank you for your Word, and for Jesus, your living Word. By your Holy Spirit, open our eyes and our understanding, so that we may hear what you are saying to each one of us today. In 'Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Revival!¹

I guess for many people after the business of Christmas, having spent time with friends and family, maybe eating more than usual, or overindulging in other ways; a time of rest and recovery, maybe that's what you want, or maybe what you have been able to have in the last few days – perhaps in preparation of New Year's Eve. And the revival that will be needed after that night. Many of the shops will be hoping that the Christmas season will have helped revive the economic situation.

But there is another type of revival that is required, that is not just a physical revival, more than just rest and refreshment after busy times, or an improvement in the financial situation.

As important as these types of revival are, there is also a need for spiritual revival – and that is what has happened in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah that was read for us.

And spiritual revival, is what I believe is needed in so many lives, in this city, across this nation, and across the world; outside of the church and even in the lives of those in this congregation.

Revival. The greatest need for each and every person.

It's been a few weeks since you had a message from the Book of Nehemiah – so just to recap, Nehemiah was a man who was passionate about God, about restoring God's honour by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. As you would have heard in a sermon a few weeks ago, in the ancient world, when a city was destroyed or the people dispersed into exile, people viewed it as if/though their god was useless; he had left or was not able to defend their people. That is why it was so important to restore the walls, not only from a protection point of view.

So rebuilding the wall had a huge impact in the other nations, the reason why Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem had the troubles they did. And it also had a huge impact on the people. So where we pick up the story today, in Chapter 8, the wall is finished. But the work is not finished; it is not yet complete. The people might have thought the work was finished, but it seems, God knew there was still work to be done – work to be done in people's lives. The people encountered God, and there was a revival. And it all began with the R.E.A.D-ing of God's word.

So let's pick up the story. We are told in the 1st verse, the people asked Ezra to read to Law. Did you catch that? The *people* asked. They were the ones wanting to hear from God. They were expectant. And, it was read in a public place, in the square by the Water Gate, and it was everyone – men and women and all those who could understand. In another translation and commentary I've been reading says it included children.

¹ NOTE: this sermon was preached as part of a series on the Book of Nehemiah, on Sunday 29 December 2013.

This was radical. To include women and children, that was not normally done. And it was read in public, not just confined to within the walls of the Temple. (This is probably where Ezra had been doing his work.) The Word of God was brought out from the Temple and made public, by request of the people.

People are searching, searching for something more, something beyond what they can see and touch, for something spiritual. But today, many are searching in the wrong places – in materialism, in endless shallow relationships, in things that give a moment of pleasure and then gone.

I wonder, are there opportunities or requests, to make God's word known, that maybe we have missed? Opportunities to take the gospel out of the sanctuary and make it public? It reminds me of the words of the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans (10:14), how can they believe if they have not heard? And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them?

So the people came, and they came expectantly. They expected to hear from God. As soon as Ezra started to read, they worshiped God. Ezra read the Law, and the Levites explained, so that the people could understand. And the people had an emotional response, in verse 9 we are told the people had been weeping.

Why had they been weeping?

I guess there might be a few reasons for this. It might be because they realised how awesome God is and they felt so unworthy and they realised how much they had broken God's law and sinned against him and caused hurt and harm to others because of this. And they were remorseful and sorrowful and so they wept and mourned in response. But Nehemiah, Ezra, and Levites, say "no, no don't weep, this is a day to joyous, to be happy."

Why do they say that?

I think it's because from God's law we know how much God's loves us, and even though it might make us feel unworthy, there is great joy in that – the Creator and Sustainer of the universe loves you. However much you might think you are not worthy of it, He loves you. And that is a source of joy and a reason to celebrate.

So the Book of the Law is read, it is explained to them, they understand, and there is an emotional response. They, the people of Jerusalem, have had encounter with God. They weep and cry but are told to go home and celebrate, have a nice meal and share it with others. And they do that and they come back the next day, to hear more of God's law, and they realise there are things that they have not been doing. They have not been celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. And so they go and collect what they need to be able to celebrate this feast.

So they action the Word of God, they do what they now realise they should have been doing. They have heard God's Word read to them, they have had it explained to them and they have encountered God through His word, and they have actioned what they need to

do, what they realised they haven't been doing. Not wanting to take anything away from next week's message, following on from chapter 8, they dedicated themselves to God.

Revival came to the people of Jerusalem. And it all began with the R.E.A.D -ing of God's Word.

I have felt for some time now, that there is a weariness about the church. And not just in one congregation, but the church in Scotland generally. Maybe it's a weariness from the lack of progress, weariness of not being listened to, weariness of debates that don't seem to be going anywhere, weariness of 'what's the point...

... I wonder if some of this weariness comes from the lack of focus on the word of God – lack of reading God's word, lack of understanding of God's word because of lack of explanation, lack of actioning, doing what we know we should do. Some congregations are better than others, regarding the preaching and explanation of the God's Word, but it's not just the responsibility of the ones leading the congregation, but also each individual. Each person has the responsibility to read God's word and to seek understanding and to put into practice what we read.

It's as though we are trying to fight a battle without the right equipment – we are fighting without the 'sword of the Spirit' which is the word of God. But whatever the cause, there is a deep need for revival. And I wonder if this passage, this chapter in Nehemiah has something to teach us about that. That to encounter God, for revival to happen, it begins with the reading of His word. But it doesn't end there, the word is explained so that people can understand and we can encounter God and respond, both in our emotions and with our actions.

We have just celebrated Christmas a few days ago, where we remember the birth of Jesus, the Word became a human being, Emmanuel, God with us, God *with* us. We have the choice; we can leave Jesus as the baby in the manger, cute and adorable, meek and mild. Or we can acknowledge Him as Christ the King, Saviour, that when he died on the cross and rose again, that he opened the way to God.

And at Pentecost, with the pouring out of God's spirit, we can encounter God. Of course we can still encounter God in his word. But we also have His Holy Spirit who indwells those who believe, the Spirit who teaches and inspires us.

Soon we will be celebrating communion. Maybe we just think of it as bread and wine, a ceremony or ritual of some sort, but it is *communion*, a way to commune, to be with and encounter God.

The building work had finished for the people of Jerusalem. The building work has finished for the first stage of the redevelopment for this congregation. We have had 1 full year back in our refurbished building. For the moment, there is rest from the building work, as it was for the people in Jerusalem with Nehemiah.

But God hadn't finished with the building work that *He* was doing. He wanted to revive his people, to build a people, and to build his kingdom. So, as we are in a vacancy, unsure of what is going to happen next, and with questions ongoing in the wider church, debates that

are continuing, the future being uncertain, the end of another year – looking back and looking forward into the year ahead. We know what has been, maybe we don't fully understand it, and maybe we have a fuzzy picture of what the future might be, but God knows. And he's into restoration, into rebuilding...he's into revival.

So is that the next stage for us?

From the book of Nehemiah, it all began with the reading of God's Word, but it didn't stop there. There was the explanation, the encounter with God, the emotional response, the actioning of what they heard (it wasn't just head knowledge, they went and did, it probably seemed daft to their neighbours, building shelters on their rooftops, but there was purpose in it) and they dedicated themselves, becoming disciples, really.

There is, however, an unfortunate postscript to this story. A few chapters later they fell away, a very human kind of response, and Nehemiah corrects them. This should act as a reminder to us to be constantly reading the Word of God, constantly trying to understand what we read or have it explained to us, constantly encountering God, constantly actioning what we hear, constantly dedicating ourselves, to be faithful disciples. It is so easy to fall away, to go back to old habits. That's why we need to keep reading, encountering, actioning and dedicating.

I believe revival is possible, and not only possible but necessary. I said during the kid's talk, that I have a big prayer for the year ahead and that by the end of the message, you would know what it is.

If you haven't worked it out yet, it's for revival to come to Scotland. I do see isolated pockets of revival happening, like spot fires, dotted around the map of Scotland, but wouldn't it be great to see happen what we read in this chapter, *all* the people gathered and they *all* worshiped God.

And it all began with the reading of God's word – we need to READ.

Let's pray.

Lord, may Your Word be read and made known throughout this city, and throughout this nation. May Your people rise up, men, women and children, and declare that Jesus is Saviour to all, and He is Lord of heaven and earth. By Your grace, may revival come and lives be changed, for your glory and honour and praise. Amen.

Encounter with God

- **R**ead – the Word of God
- **E**xplained – the Word of God
- **A**ctioned – the Word of God
- **D**edicated – themselves to the Word of God

Figure 1: PowerPoint slide used during preaching of the Sermon