

## The Path to Restoration Cultivating Spiritual Renewal Nehemiah 8

### Introduction

*"Every mighty move of the Spirit of God has had its source in the prayer chamber."*  
– E.M. Bounds

In Chapter 8, Nehemiah's prayer finally prevails as the Spirit of God works through the scriptures to bring revival to the people of God. How would you feel about a service that contained about six hours of Bible reading? Can you believe that's what the people ask for in this chapter!

It was a time of unusual spiritual renewal. At the center of this revival was a focus on the Scripture. Derek Kidner writes, "This day would prove to be a turning-point. From now on, the Jews would be predominantly 'a people of the book.'" (*Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* [IVP], p. 106).

Chapter 8 teaches us that God welcomes us with open arms whenever we turn to Him for help. It's when we neglect God's Word that our spiritual relationship with the Lord begins to deteriorate. Spiritual renewal begins with an emphasis on God's Word. Hearing and understanding God's Word revives us and awakens our spiritual sensitivity.

The Holy Spirit breathes life from the scriptures into our hearts and inspires us to seek after God.

### I. Read God's Word

Spiritual renewal stirs us to read God's Word. The people asked Ezra to bring out the book (scroll) of the Law that God gave to Moses for the people. The priests read it publicly from dawn until noon!

Verses 1 says, "Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra, the priest, brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who *could* hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people *were attentive* to the Book of the Law." ([Neh 8: 1-3 NKJV](#))

People don't usually gather together to listen to the Word of God read for an extended period unless the Holy Spirit inspires them to do it. The people knew that God had given these words to Moses to read to the people. Even in the New Testament, Paul instructs Timothy to give attention "to the public reading of Scripture." (1 Timothy 4:13).

We are privileged to live in a culture where almost everyone knows how to read. We have multiple translations of the Bible available from which to choose.

Spiritual renewal in your life begins by honoring God's Word.

Have you ever read through the entire Bible? Maybe you should give it a try!

The first five books of the Bible are called the Torah by the Jews.

Genesis and Exodus are interesting reading, but when you get to Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, it's easy to get bogged down.

However, these books were Israel's instruction manual for how to walk before God.

Ezra was the priest responsible for rebuilding the temple and challenging the people to return to worshipping God.

By the time Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, the people were already beginning to experience a spiritual awakening.

Nehemiah carried on Ezra's work by rebuilding the city walls and again calling the people to worship.

Nehemiah knew Ezra was devoted to God and believed under Ezra's guidance, everyone would listen to the priests read the Word of God.

The priests read the scriptures for six hours, from daylight to mid-day.

The people wanted to hear it and sacrificed to listen to it.

## **II. Accept God's Word**

Secondly, spiritual renewal occurs when we accept what God says.

Verse 4 tell us how God's Word was received, "So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkihah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, *and* Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was *standing* above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with *their* faces to the ground."

(Neh 8: 4-6 NKJV)

Just because you have ears that work does not guarantee that you can hear what's being said. God made us with two ears that we cannot close and one mouth we can and probably should. We all learn to block out what we don't want to hear! Jesus

said in Mark 4:9, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." He said in Luke 8:18, "Take care how you listen."

The Bible doesn't just contain the words of God; they are the words of God. The people were both attentive and reverent as the priests read God's Word to them. When Ezra opened the Torah, the people stood up as if to greet a royal visitor, and then they bowed down in worship. They weren't worshipping the scroll that Ezra held in his hand; they worshipped the God who gave them the scroll.

Spiritual renewal inspires us to listen to and accept God's Word reverently. Ezra stood on a wooden platform built so all the people could see the Torah and hear its words. But hearing alone is not good enough. We must take to heart what God has to say to us.

By far, the greatest preparation for spiritual renewal takes place in the heart. When the Spirit of God calls to us, we are willing to set aside our own agendas and submit to God's Word. On each side of Ezra were men who supported his ministry of teaching God's Word. The impact of God's Word can be so much greater when a person can see others who support it.

When Ezra opened the scroll, the people stood up and thanked God and said Amen when Ezra blessed the Lord. When they prayed and praised the Lord, they lifted up their hands. Then they worshipped by bowing down before the Lord. Thanksgiving, prayer, and praise are excellent indicators that the Spirit of God and His Word are working in us.

### **III. Understand God's Word**

Spiritual renewal occurs when we understand God's Word. Verse 7 says, "Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people *stood* in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading." (Neh 8:7-8 NKJV)

The priests with Ezra explained the law to the people. These teachers clarified the reading of Scripture by teaching its meaning and making application of it. Ezra would probably read a section, and then his assistants, in smaller groups, would expound on that section to make the meaning clear to the people. Obviously, much of the Bible is straightforward enough that anyone can read and understand it. Mark Twain commented it wasn't the sections of the Bible he couldn't understand that bothered him; it was the parts that he did understand that troubled him! Some Scripture passages are difficult to grasp, but God has given the church pastors and teachers to help people understand and apply His Word to their lives.

To properly apply the Bible, you must interpret it correctly. To correctly interpret it, you must understand what the author meant and the context of his writing. Since the Bible fits together as a unified whole, we must grasp what the Bible teaches by

comparing Scripture with Scripture, allowing the Bible to interpret itself. Sometimes this requires historical research to discover the customs and historical events that relate to the biblical text. Sometimes it requires knowing the original biblical languages or consulting scholars who understand the words and grammatical constructions. If you take a text out of its context, you can make the Bible say just about anything you want!

There are two essential things to remember about sound biblical teaching. First, sound biblical teaching must be accurate, clear, and applicable to life. Secondly, it requires commitment from the teacher and the students.

- Teachers must take the time to study and prepare. (The teacher has not taught until the student has learned.)
- Students must come with an attitude to learn and honor God.

We see this principle in Nehemiah 8. Nehemiah was a gifted administrator who could organize and mobilize people to get the wall built. But when it came time to teach the Scriptures, he calls upon Ezra because he was skilled in the Law of Moses. According to Ezra 7:6, he had set his heart to study, practice, and teach the law. Ezra and Nehemiah worked together as a great team in ministry. They also appointed other gifted teachers to help the people understand God's Word.

The people needed to understand the scriptures. If they didn't understand it, it wouldn't do them much good. Understanding should be the goal of any teacher. The Holy Spirit anointed Ezra and helped the people to discern God's ways. That is the Holy Spirit's continuing ministry.

Spiritual renewal occurs when we read the Word, accept the Word, understand the Word, and finally, apply the Word. It is all for naught if there is no corresponding response that brings about a spiritual transformation.

#### **IV. Respond to the Word**

I Corinthians 8:1 says that knowledge apart from obedience leads to arrogance and pride. The goal of spiritual renewal is to transform our lives, making us humble and thankful people. Their first response was one of repentance. The people wept when they heard and understood God's Word because they realized how much they had sinned against God. Verse 9 says, "And Nehemiah, who *was* the governor, Ezra the priest *and* scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day *is* holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for *this* day *is* holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day *is* holy; do not be grieved." (Neh 8:9-11 NKJV)

The Word of God was doing its intended work. Even though it is a good thing to be humbled by the Holy Spirit's conviction, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites didn't want the people to mourn. The agony of our sin should never exceed the

knowledge of God's forgiveness. Yes, we are great sinners, and realizing that, is very humbling, but Jesus is a great Savior! The more the light of God's Word shines into our hearts, the more we will see areas where we do not conform to His righteousness. The Word of God convicts us and exposes our sinfulness. But the Holy Spirit helps us to turn away from our worldly ways to experience God's love and forgiveness.

Spiritual renewal always involves repentance, but it also involved a new joy! Repentance clears the way for God's joy to fill our hearts. We can rejoice knowing God forgives us and welcomes us into His family. And as we apply God's Word to our daily lives, it also causes us to change our behavior. Experiencing God's love and grace makes us want to reach out to others who need Him too.

Ezra and Nehemiah reminded the people to send food portions to those who had nothing. Titus 2:14 says that God's salvation "purifies for Himself a people...zealous for good deeds." When you feel conviction because of your sinful behavior, you should thank God because you know He hasn't given up on you! God is still doing a work in you! You may feel like giving up on God, but He never gives up on you!

In verse 12, the people accept Ezra's counsel and choose to rejoice. "And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly because they understood the words that were declared to them." (Neh 8:12 NKJV)

The people went home that day praising God because they realized that He was restoring and healing their lives. In verse 13, the leaders gathered together to learn how they could further promote this spiritual awakening. "Now on the second day, the heads of the fathers' *houses* of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law." (Neh 8:13 NKJV)

To apply what we learn from God's Word requires a deliberate and determined obedience to God. In verse 14, "And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as *it is* written." (Neh 8:14-15 NKJV)

The Feast of Sukkot or "booths" commemorates the Exodus and Israel's dependence on the will of God (Leviticus 23:42-43). The holiday lasted seven days. The people heard in the reading of the Law that they should observe the Feast of Booths or what we often call the Feast of Tabernacles. And since it just happened to be perfect timing since Sukkot was only two weeks away, they decided to celebrate it! Verse 16 says, "Then the people went out and brought *them* and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the

days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day, *there was* a sacred assembly, according to the *prescribed* manner." (Neh 8: 16-18 NKJV)

This was a perfect response in simple obedience. Their attitude was, "If God said it, we will do it." So they immediately began preparations to celebrate it. The people had not celebrated a Feast of Booths like this one since Joshua's time (8: 17)! So they had to rely on God's Word rather than tradition. Their obedience, however, launched a time of grand celebration and rejoicing as they worshipped God.

The Feast of Booths lasted a whole week, and every day consisted of more reading of God's law, ending with a solemn assembly on the final day (8: 18). And still, they rejoiced to be able to celebrate God's Word. They were so thankful they had rediscovered their relationship with God, and they wanted to follow Him. They were filled with gratitude and love towards God for helping them restore the walls and rebuild the city.

They gave God all the credit for what they were able to accomplish!

### **Conclusion**

It is so great when people come to church with reverence for God and say, "God, teach me! I am desperate to know You more!" They are ready to respond to the Word and profit from the teaching. Spiritual renewal changes your heart. It's the natural response to God's love and grace. When you finally get tired of the pain and misery that surrounds your life, and you become desperate enough to cry out to God and say, "Please help me, Lord!" you are about to experience a miracle. God will take the pain and misery that has rendered you powerless and replace it with strength and faith to overcome.

If you take to heart what God is saying today, you too can experience this spiritual renewal for yourself. Verse 18 concludes by saying, "Day by day, from the first day until the last day, they read from the Book of the Law of God."

Establish a habit of obedience and surrender to God, and let His miracle and revival transform your life. The Holy Spirit will make sure of it!