

9. THE WORD, THE JOY, AND THE STRENGTH

In the late 1970s the African nation of Somalia went without rain for three consecutive years. Relief agencies sprang up in this parched land. In one camp, the director taught how to catch fish in the river of Juba, where a fast growing species called talapia abounds. Somalis in the camp had never tasted fish. Hundreds of Somalis had starved to death within the sight of a river glutted with food.

Israel faced a similar problem in Nehemiah's day. After seventy years of captivity, many of Israel's who came back to their homeland, have never tasted God's Word for them. It was not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. They were spiritually starving to death within the sight of a rebuilt temple well-stocked with the Law of Moses.

Tonight, we are going to witness how the Word of God rained down on the parched hearts of Israelites and revive them from spiritual near death. And we will see how God is going to use this study to give us hope, joy and strength in our hearts and lives.

The word, "Revival" brings the concepts of crowded tents, churches, or stadium with evangelists preaching to the lost souls. Actually that is an incorrect concept. It is for the believers who walked away from the Lord. You cannot revive completely dead people. That is the lost people's spiritual condition. But for those who once received the life from Jesus, tasted the Bread of Life and the Living Water, now they stay away from the Lord and finding themselves in the midst of the dying world. This word, "Revival" is for them.

2 Chronicles 7:14 if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

These Jews were away from the Lord and away from His Word. They were spiritually dying even though they were very much alive physically. Sounds like some one you know or even ourselves?

A. REVIVAL AT HAND

They accomplished rebuilding Jerusalem wall in 52 days in spite of hindrance and harassment from the enemies. It is time to remember God's goodness and faithfulness with a celebration.

Nehemiah 8:1 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.

Who is this dude, Ezra? He was the same person who wrote the book of Ezra. Yes, there is some difference among theologians about the authorship of the Book of Ezra. But mostly we believe that it is Ezra himself who wrote the book. He came back from exile to Israel before Nehemiah and became the pointman of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. He was a scribe and priest. As a scribe, Ezra possesses expertise in two areas. First, he is an expert in legal matter, second, he is an expert in interpreting the Scriptures.

B. REVIVAL STARTS FROM THE WORD

Nehemiah 8:2 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.

For the Jews, it is significant because it marks the beginning of their most sacred month of the year, one in which they will celebrate three important occasions called feast: "The Feast of Trumpets", "The Feast of Atonement", and "The Feast of Booths".

Verses 3-8 present one of the clearest examples in the Bible of genuine expository study of the Scriptures. Expository study can be divided in three ways.

1) READING OF THE SCRIPTURES

Nehemiah 8:3-5 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. 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, Hilkiyah, 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.

There is no such a Super Christian who just got saved and walk into a phone booth and come out in blue spandex, red boots and cape with "SC" on his chest. By the way, the "SC" would stand for Super Christian.

It takes a lot of times to know God's heart and understand Him. There is no shortcut other than reading the Word of God and put it in our hearts.

We find that apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to read the scripture regularly in 1 Tim 4:13.

2) PRAISE TO GOD THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

Nehemiah 8:6 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.

While we read the Word of God, it is not uncommon things have a spontaneous, unguarded expression of praises and thanksgivings to God for His goodness, faithfulness and love.

Some people think that it is irreverent thing to lift their hands or responding during the worship or even teaching. It is not so. The same people will scream their heads off during the football games, but they would not show their heartfelt of praises to their God

3) INSIGHT FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Neh. 8:7-8 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiyah, 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.

There should be a beautiful balance between the emotional and the intellectual. Many Christian churches in America get involved with emotional praise and worship and hyped up service. People might get excited about it and go home. Next week they have to come up with something more hyped up and exciting to beat what happened last week. To do that, it is not unusual for the pastoral staff to come up with some weird ways, not necessarily godly ways to praise God. Pastor Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa said this, "What you strive to gain, you have to strive to maintain." If God is in it, we don't have to strive to gain or maintain. Because it will flow so well from His throne. Nothing wrong with exciting, spirit-filled worship and praise. But without proper teaching and studying the Word of God, people will be still hungry spiritually.

God considers His Word very important.

Ps. 138:2 I will worship toward Your holy temple, And praise Your name For Your lovingkindness and Your truth; For You have magnified Your word above all Your name.

Matt. 24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

2 Tim 3:16-17 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

If I can have one wish on this earth, it would be that all the people in the world take the Word of God into their hearts and live for Him. With the Word of God in their hearts, they won't be needing any fleshly desires and having selfish attitude. But there will be only one thing in our hearts, living for the glory of God.

We took the Ten Commandments and prayers out of school. And we teach those kids that they came out of slime under the theory of evolution, and they wonder why kids act like slime. If we take the Word of God out of our hearts, we won't have peace, we won't have hope, we won't have wisdom to handle anything. The Word of God will keep us out of trouble.

Ps. 119:9-11 How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!

Ps. 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.

C. REVIVAL BRINGS REPENTANCE

Nehemiah 8:9 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.

One of the true signs of revival is repentance, turning away from our wickedness. They were comparing what the Lord wanted their forefathers to do and remembering how their forefathers reacted against their God and repenting from their own sins. Until we realize that we are sinners and we need God for our salvation, we will not be saved by His grace.

Neh. 8:10-12 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." 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.

Here we have a theme verse for all the fast food chains in America.

"Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet"

So they all heard the Word of God that penetrated their hearts and made them to realize their sins. They repented and in the midst of this wonderful rich feast from God, a spontaneous praises to God raised up. This worship and praise brought joy to their hearts and gave them strength.

When we are down and out, everything seems go wrong. It is the time to praise God and worship His goodness and remind ourselves for His faithfulness. See how much strength the Lord gives to us!

D. APPLICATIONS

1) No life is complete without the spiritual dimension.

We all know what is like out there without God. Everything is empty and will not fill us up. Only God can.

2) No spiritual dimension is complete without the Word of God.

We can make our own gods or try some cults. The Word of God is the only One that can show us the Way, the Truth and the Life, Jesus.

3) The Word of God in us is not complete without our personal obedience.

James tells us that we should not be only hearers of the Word, but doers of the Word. Faith without deeds is dead.

4) Our personal obedience will bring forth joy of the Lord that becomes strength in our lives.