

Spiritual Renewal – Step One

Getting Back to the Book

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC

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July 9, 2023

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Purpose: The people of Israel had forsaken the word of God and they were taken captive and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. After 70 years, they were allowed to return and rebuild the temple, walls, and streets. Now they needed a spiritual renewal. The first step was to “get back to the book” – the Word of God. The people came prepared to hear what God would have them to learn. The word was presented and the people stood listening intently. As a result of this, they worshipped, wept, and went home rejoicing.

A lady came to the hospital to visit a friend. She had not been in a hospital for several years and felt uneasy, not knowing about all the new technology.

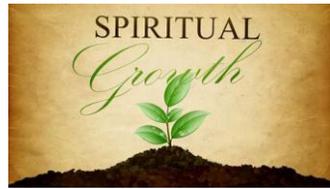


A technician followed her onto the elevator, wheeling a large, intimidating looking machine with tubes and wires and dials.

"Boy, would I hate to be hooked up to that thing," she said.

"So would I," replied the technician. "It's a floor-cleaning machine."¹

There are many things that war against us in life and rob us of our Spiritual growth. Complacency, routine, ordinary, status quo, distractions, boredom, vacations, business, golf, illness, travel, social media, zoom meetings, shopping, cleaning house, yard work, grass cutting, visiting with friends, family visiting, children's sports activities, exhaustion, forgetfulness, lack of community, conflict – All of these item's war against our spiritual growth as Christians.



The ordinary things of life can become so central to our life, that we feel we must give up something. Sadly, participation and involvement in the life of the church many times, takes second place to anything else that comes up. Over time, we drift away from God and soon the cares and concerns of the world encompass our daily thought life. As someone slips away in participation, so does scripture reading, Bible study, Sunday school attendance, as well as financial support.



Most of us gathered here, understand the importance of stewardship and giving. Many people in Spilman are involved in a lot of changes in their life. The changes may be small at first, but over time, the changes become significant. With that in mind, I felt it was time for us to consider how we could become spiritually renewed and recharged. Change can be exhausting and sometimes we can lose our focus. Today, I am beginning the first in the



series of sermons on Spiritual Renewal. Today's sermon focus is "Getting Back to the Book."

About ten years ago, I had the privilege of going to Israel. For me, going to Israel enabled the Bible to come alive for me. I saw the places Jesus walked and lived.



I traveled the paths He may have walked, ministered, healed, served, taught, suffered, bled, and died. Sharon and I have discussed our need to travel more together, so in mid-October, Sharon and I have decided to take a trip to Israel. This will be her first trip to the Holy Land.

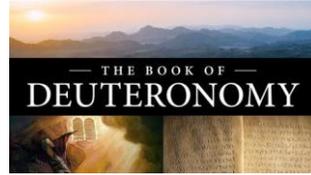
Through the centuries, this land has been home to great upheaval, conflict, disagreements, blood shed, strife, and toil. To actually live in this dry, difficult place is beyond our comprehension. After seeing Jerusalem in person, I can understand passages like Nehemiah much better and the love of this place.

Over the next few months, to help us gain a deeper understanding of Spiritual Renewal, I want us to examine a particular difficult time in the life of Israel. The story is lifted from the pages of Ezra and Nehemiah. It was a traumatic and turbulent time in which to live. But faith, genuine faith and trust in God, shown through the man called Nehemiah.



Background for Ezra and Nehemiah

In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read of the life of the Nation of Israel over the forty years in which they wandered through the wilderness.



Just before crossing over into the Promised Land, Moses is standing on Mount Nebo, located on the east side of the Dead Sea, giving the people of Israel his last sermon. He is telling them they are ready to move into a land flowing with milk and honey. God will drive the inhabitants away and they are to move in, destroy all that remain there, and possess the land.

Moses tells them in no uncertain terms, that if they listen to the word of God, obey what it says and teaches them, then they will be a blessed people. BUT if they become satisfied in their hearts and forget what God has done for them, and turn from obeying the Word of God, and begin to worship other idols, then God will surely destroy them. Even after they move into the land, under the leadership of Joshua, they had a special ceremony where the people were divided and stood on the Mount of Blessings and the Mount of Curses. They were reminded there, if they obey the word of the Lord, they will be blessed, but if they disobey, they will be cursed. The year they crossed the Jordan and captured the city of Jericho was around 1406 B.C.



If you fast forward the history of Israel, you will find that David became King over Israel around the year 993 B.C. His son, Solomon was heir of the throne and it was

appointed unto him to build the temple there on Mount Moriah. This temple stood as a place of worship and adoration for God. The people of Israel thought they were invincible and no one would destroy them. God brought them out of Egypt, made them a people, gave them a land, and established the City of Jerusalem as their city of worship.



But they forgot about the commandments of the Lord and soon lapsed into idolatry. Solomon was the one leading the nation far away from God. The nation was split into two upon Solomon's death. After many evil kings, in the year 586 B.C., the great Babylonian empire entered Jerusalem and destroyed the city, plundered the temple, and pushed down all the stone works there. The brightest and best were taken into captivity, the middle class were killed, and the poor and scattered were left to tend sheep and watch the weeds grow up amongst the rubble of Jerusalem.



But there was a prophecy by Jeremiah 25:11 that said the city would be rebuilt after spending 70 years in captivity. Nehemiah was born in captivity and became the cupbearer of the king. He was burdened about his former homeland and when news of how desolate it looked came to him, it overwhelmed him with grief. Nehemiah had heard of the former beauty of the city. He could picture in his mind's eye what it once looked like but now his heart broke



knowing that this was all because of the sin of God's chosen people.

Punishment had fallen upon the people because they had forgotten God, were not obedient to what it taught, and began worshipping foreign gods. Everyone in captivity knew why they were not in their homeland. They were being punished for rejecting and not obeying the word of God.

One day, Nehemiah was standing before King Artaxerxes pouring wine. The king asked why his countenance was so sad. Nehemiah opened up his heart and shared with the King that his former homeland, the City of Jerusalem was in shambles and he wanted to go and rebuild the city of his fathers. This Persian King was now in charge of the entire empire once controlled by the Babylonians. It was their policy to repatriate former slaves back to their former homes and create alliances and collect taxes in exchange for the freedom to return home.

Nehemiah pleaded his case before the king and the king responded favorably. He not only allowed Nehemiah to return, but everyone that wanted could go back home and rebuild the city. Nehemiah received letters of permission to go back, obtained letters of credit for timber from the neighboring cities, and money from the king to rebuild the city. He had permission and funding to do the project at hand.

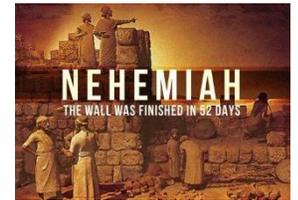
The call went out to the people of Israel to return to their home town. The response was amazing. A list of all the

families and individuals that packed up are listed in the genealogy in the Book of Ezra and Nehemiah. All together 42,360 people packed up and went back home. This did not include 7,337 servants, 245 singers, 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6720 donkeys.



Each family took a section and began to rebuild the city wall. When the enemies came to discourage them or attack them in the project, they posted guards over those moving stones and

building gates. Amazingly, they rebuilt the city in 52 days! It is amazing what people can do when they come together for a purpose and work as a team.



Now that the city's walls were up, many people stayed within the city walls and began to build their homes. Others chose to live outside the city in nearby cities and towns. A system of worship was re-established, a collection of tithes was reinstated, and they were now home again.

Now that they were safely established behind secure walls, it was time for Nehemiah to challenge the people to step up to the spiritual challenge they faced. They needed a spiritual renewal and Nehemiah went about reestablishing them through a ten-step process. The first step in that process involved getting back to the Word of God.

This is where our passage of scripture begins today in Nehemiah 8:1-12.

The People Came Prepared to Hear the Word of God

The very first step that any one ever undertakes in order to grow spiritually and become a “mature believer” is to recapture their love for God’s word.

If you only know a few verses of scripture, attend a few church services, sing a few songs on Sunday, and do not study your bible on a regular basis, you are still a baby Christian. As you study God’s word, you begin to understand the things of God better and come to understand that we are called to be obedient to what we read. Knowing God’s word and Obeying God’s word are the keys to a growing Christian life.



The people that built the walls, streets, and temple there in Jerusalem had a hunger and thirst for the word of God. Nehemiah 8:1-3 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 (Deuteronomy) 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 the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.”

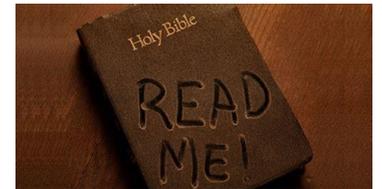
The first thing I see in this passage of scripture is that the people were united as “one man.” They had just finished the task of rebuilding the walls and now they wanted to come together to hear the Word of God. In verse four we see there was a gathering of individuals that sat on the platform as Ezra the scribe began to read from God’s word. Even some children were gathered in their midst – all that had ears willing to hear and understand. They came anticipating a word from God – they came hungry.



I have heard report after report of ministers of the gospel going into some of the remotest places on earth bringing the message of God. The people would sit for hours listening and learning more about God and His plan of salvation. Today, here in America, we all have at least one copy of God’s word. But how often do we open it and read it?!

Someone said if all the Christians in America would take their bibles and blow the dust off them, there would be a great dust storm across our nation. It is so sad but so true.

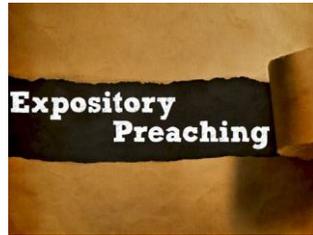
Amos 8:11-12 says that God was going to send a famine upon the land. *“I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.”* I am afraid we have a famine in our land today. We yawn as the minister preaches and reads the word of God. We are satisfied and are famished and simply don’t know it.



The people of Nehemiah’s day, asked for God’s word to be brought forth and read to them.

point to the words as they read from their scriptures. They revere the word of God as the source of life for them individually as well as for their communities. We should take a cue from them and revere the word of God.

Verse 8 says, *“So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.”*



The best I can understand the way in which the law was read to them is similar to the way we do our bible studies on Wednesday nights. We read a verse or two and I take time to expound on those particular verses, or I expound on what was read. We go through this phrase by phrase, and verse by verse. I understand Charles Spurgeon used this method to expound upon a scripture passage prior to his preaching from it to help the congregation catch the sense of what he was going to preach on later.

As you study a passage of scripture in this manner, you learn exactly what the verses say. It is so important that you understand fully what it is saying so that you don't add to it or change it to suit your own theology or understanding. You begin to uncover the original meaning of the passage as you meditate on the words, phrases, and the interconnectedness each verse has to the surrounding passage. You can also make some practical applications to our setting today as you examine the context. As we study these passages of scripture on Wednesday night, we have uncovered contemporary applications to these Old and New Testament passages.

The Bible is not just a history book. It is a living book applicable to everyday struggles, trials, and tribulations. It can be the much-needed light in our dark world. Ezra and Nehemiah wanted the people of Israel to become grounded in the word of God. They did not want them to live in ignorance. Genuine teaching is not simply talking. It is communicating in such a way that lives are changed as they encounter the living God through His living word.

**The Bible is Living
and Relevant TODAY**

The Result of Hearing the Word of God

The result of hearing God's word was evident. Even though the people had accomplished a tremendous amount of work in a short period of time, they still were not spiritually prepared to live up to God's Word.

The people lifted up their hands in praise to God and said, *“Amen, Amen.”* The words of the Law touched the people to their very core. They were moved with brokenness and they bowed their knees and worshipped God. They were repentant because they realized how they themselves had repeated the sins of their fathers. They also were headed down a path of destruction once again.



Apparently, the word of God had been so scarce in that day they were deeply moved. I Samuel 3:1 reveals an attitude we sometimes find in our hearts. *“And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation.”* The people of Israel had not had the word of

God for so long that they wept when they heard it, tears of joy and tears of shame.

The leaders came down after reading the word of God and ministered unto the people. They told them not to mourn or weep anymore. They said that this day was holy unto the Lord. Go back home, eat, be filled, and sorrow no more. For the joy of the Lord is your strength. They were weeping and priests were trying to encourage them to turn to God and enjoy His goodness.

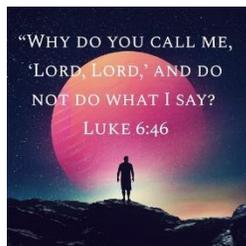


The crowd broke up and went home, ate, and rejoiced in their understanding of the Word of God.

The next day they returned and discovered that there was a holiday they had not observed in many years. They decided in their hearts to observe that holiday once again. It was known as the festival of booths or the Festival of Tabernacles. This holiday occurs around September or October.

For seven days the people would live in small booths constructed out of branches and leaves. It was a campout to remind the people of their temporary dwelling places the people lived in as they traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land. So, the people with one heart, decided to be obedient, and reinstated this holiday. Even today, Jews across the world continue to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles (or Booths).

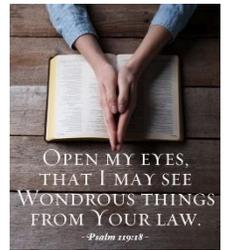
We need to realize there can be no renewal apart from God's word. **There can be no renewal apart from God's Word.** If we want God's blessing, we



need to become involved in studying and obeying His word once again. Jesus told His disciples time and time again to obey what He has taught. In Luke 6:46, Jesus said, "*But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do the things which I say?*"

The first step towards Spiritual Renewal is getting back to the book. We need to recognize that God's word is here for us to learn from and it is for our good. It is good medicine for our soul.

As you move forward from today onward, I pray that you would approach God's word with a sense of expectancy as to what you will discover from it. It is my prayer that you will have open eyes and an open heart to hear from God.



Psalm 119:18, is the very center of the Bible. It says, "*Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things in your Law.*" Over the past year, I have included a daily Bible reading in the monthly TIE newsletter. It is my prayer for you that as we begin our time of Spiritual Renewal, you can commit to listen or read to a passage of scripture each day. If you do this for one year, you can say, "I have read through the entire Bible this year."

If you aren't growing in your understanding of God's word, you are going backwards. We are called to "grow in the knowledge and wisdom." Let us commit to do that starting today.

LET US PRAY

Notes: ¹Mikey's Funnies, A Machine Funny, June 16, 2023