

THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH

SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH

by Steve Zeisler

The remarkable eighth chapter of Nehemiah records a revival. It remains a stirring witness to God's presence.

I've wondered at times what it would be like for a pro football player to win a Superbowl and wear a Superbowl ring, or for a member of the armed forces to receive a Medal of Honor, or for a writer to win the Pulitzer Prize. Such experiences represent the highest point that one's profession can offer.

A priest and scribe named Ezra reached such a pinnacle. Ezra 7:10 tells us, "...Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." After the people rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, Ezra was called by the entire populace to come and teach them the Bible. It was a day he would never forget.

Let's read Nehemiah 8:1-8:

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites-Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah-instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

The people built Ezra a special platform to stand on in the open square at the Water Gate, and for hours at a time they stood and listened to him. Flanked by other scribes, he read and explained the words of God to them. Another group spread out through the crowd and explained what was being read. The marvelous words of God told who he was and who they were and what it meant to be human and why history was as it was. They declared the great laws that informed the people of what they were made for, giving them hope when they failed.

Ezra wasn't trying to figure out how to create interest where there was none. He was swept up by what God did. It was a revival. Let's see what observations we can make about this revival.

A HUNGER FOR THE PRESENCE OF GOD

It says that in the crowd were "men and women and all who were able to understand." In those days, if this had been a formal learning environment, men and women would have been separated from each other. But this was a movement of the Spirit, and he brought together all ages and both sexes. They demonstrated a passion to know, not just to hear. They listened for a long time and they listened attentively.

Now, revivals can't be organized. In Christian ministry there are any number of options available for how to do ministry better. A particular church grows quickly, and therefore it is thought that all churches should emulate it. But I'm convinced, from my own experience and from the Scriptures, that God often acts in ways that can't be reproduced somewhere else. I don't think it is possible for anyone to create a revival, and no one should make much effort to do so. Revivals are a gift.

But while we can't recreate the event in the open square in front of the Water Gate in Jerusalem, we can learn what happened. We can long for and observe the valuable lessons that they learned. That will be our task in this message.

The last message ended with chapter 6, and you'll notice we have skipped over chapter 7. Chapter 7 is mostly a census, a long list of names of families who have returned from exile to Jerusalem and the surrounding region. There is an accounting of livestock. It also contains an accountant's ledger of the gifts that were given to the community by certain families.

But the early verses of chapter 7 have a wistful quality. Verse 1 starts out,

After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed.

We have come to the moment in the story when the great work was accomplished. The rubble was cleared, the walls were built up, the openings were closed, the gates were hung, the locks were fitted. The city was now defended again. In addition, Nehemiah appointed guards and established all the responsible people who should care for the city: the gatekeepers, singers, Levites, and others. Everything was in place. The job they had worked so hard to do was done.

But consider verse 4:

Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.

The shell was done; the city had the shape that it ought to have. But there was something missing--a vitality, a sense that this was a place that had a great, God-centered future. The city had not yet come back to life.

But it's that wistfulness, I think, that led to the revival in chapter 8. These people trusted God, faced their fears, and did the work of God. Remember, we've talked about how they had to trust one another, depend on one another, serve one another, and protect one another. The community of believers came together, and even when that was threatened by squabbles over money and position, they solved those problems. It was a wonderful thing. They had been God's instruments to build a city. They had been knitted together into a family. They had seen God use them. They had realized that their hands were empowered by the Spirit of God to do the work, that their words were coming from the Lord within them.

The experience of being used by God led to a hunger for the presence of God. They had been his servants; they wanted to be his worshipers. They had realized God's touch; they wanted to see his face. There was awakened in them not only hope but the realization that God himself could fill their field of vision, that they could know and love him, hear from him, trust him, be awakened to his truth, be nearer to his heart. The people "assembled as one man," and they called out, "Ezra, teach us the Bible. We want to know God." So Ezra read the Book of the Law of

Moses to them.

This went on for days-reading, explaining, worshipping. The passion for God focused on the word of God. Scholars have observed that this was in some ways a turning point in the history of Israel, the effect of which has lasted till now. In the past, the center of their national life had sometimes been the temple, sometimes the monarchy, sometimes the patriarchs. But from this time on they would be a people of the Book, a people for whom the Torah was the sustaining thing. And this book could never be taken from them again-or from us as Christians. Whatever changes come in the cultures of the world, whether good or bad, whatever storms arise, whatever uncertainties descend, no one can take the book from us in any age. Over and over again God's people are able to find him by asking someone like Ezra, "Teach us the Bible."

It is the Scriptures that tell the truth about God. In them God displays his person, his character, his aims, his beauty. This revival was no worship of the Bible, no desire for knowledge for its own sake. It does no good to know a lot of things in the Bible if you don't hear the One who has spoken the words. The discovery of God in the Scriptures was what the Israelites hoped for, and that's what God gave them. God made himself plain, and there was an extraordinary revival in worship, knowledge, enthusiasm, love, and vitality. Jerusalem was a forlorn city no more.

Let's make some observations about the experience these people had. In *Newsweek* magazine I've seen some versions of what they call the old conventional wisdom and the new conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom seems to turn over pretty quickly these days. Once, if something was considered conventional wisdom, it had a little staying power. But in politics, entertainment, cultural affairs, and so on, it seems as if conventional wisdom gets challenged from one week to the next.

I want to use this text as a lens to look at conventional wisdom. There is a conventional wisdom about spiritual experience, about life in God's presence. And the conventional wisdom is mostly challenged or directly contradicted by what we read here.

THE USEFULNESS OF SCRIPTURE

One piece of conventional wisdom is that the Bible is too hard to understand. If we would represent the Lord in the fast and changing world we live in today, the Bible is too difficult, too different to be directly useful. We have to speak in modern terms and kind of slip in truth between the lines. In essence, the best we can hope for in the modern era is to sort of trick people into learning the truth.

But that is contradicted in this text (and is in every age). These people were not Biblically literate. They had been living in exile. Many of them did not know Hebrew, the language that the Bible was written in. Later on in the book we're told that they required translators. These people were not hearing the old stories again; they were hearing them for the first time, with new insight. And it had to be true that these people were captured by what they heard. It's very clear that both Ezra and others throughout the crowd helped people understand it. They put it in words that could be received and applied. They connected the reality of the people to the reality of the text. This book could not be more relevant, because it talks about reality as it is. It describes the interior of human beings that does not change. It tells us what God is like. It helps us see through deceptions and foolishness. It needs to be taught and explained. So these people started with the words of God, and they knew them to be life-giving, fascinating, and real. They didn't give up on the Scriptures; they assumed the best. And in fact, they couldn't get enough of the feast. They came back day after day to hear the word of God.

In my own lifetime at PBC, during the Jesus Movement of the late sixties and early seventies, we had over a thousand people packed into the auditorium on Sunday nights week after week. Almost none of these people had any background in the Bible or in church. They had no idea what they were going to hear before they came. They would sit for long periods of time and hear complex word studies from both Hebrew and Greek, take notes, and love every minute of it-not because it suited where they came from, but because they were finally tired of being where they came from, and they wanted to be where God was. They wanted to hear something fresh, vital, hopeful. They wanted to hear the words of God, because they wanted to know the God who had spoken those

words.

The wonderful observation embedded in verse 6 is that the people loved the Bible because it led them to God. "Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!'" The people found the living, majestic, intimate, fatherly, warrior God in the words of Scripture.

PHYSICAL EXPRESSION OF WORSHIP

Consider another convention that has to do with body language in worship. Some are advocates of much greater freedom in the physical expression of worship. They say we ought to be able to dance before the Lord, raise our hands, and express our worship by physical movement more than we do. And it's clear that that's exactly what happened in this text. It says the people started out seated on the ground. Then Ezra stepped up before them, opened the Book of the Law of Moses, and began to read, and they leaped to their feet. (There are churches that have as their tradition to this day that whenever someone ascends to the lectern to read the word of God, the congregation always stands. This passage is where that tradition comes from.) Ezra began to praise God, and they raised their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped with their faces to the ground. Every one of those postures is positively regarded in the text-authentic and good: sitting, standing, hands raised, head bowed, lying prostrate.

The issue, it seems to me, is whether the expression comes because of something God has done inwardly or because of some external pressure to act a certain way, or not. I advocate that we be generous with each other, and if God moves people to stand or sit, to raise their hands or not, we assume that it is from him, and delight in whatever God does. What seems more common in our congregation is that people feel awkward if someone wants to be physically expressive, because the majority do not. There are other congregations where it goes the other direction; if you want to be still it's regarded as peculiar. This text gives good support for all kinds of physical expression in worship that is authentic and from the heart.

NO "RIGHT" KIND OF MUSIC

Another challenge to conventional wisdom comes from observing the absence of music. We're going to get to some great music in chapter 12-choirs, antiphonal singing, cymbals, harps, lyres. But here, in chapter 8, the people all came together in the hot sun and listened while Ezra was teaching the Bible, others came and explained it, and there was this overwhelming, passionate response to God: tears and joy, worship that was electrifying to experience-but no music. I am all for music, and we would be fools if we didn't thank God for the gift of music and revel in it often. But the conventional wisdom that is contradicted here is that music of a certain type is required. Christians fight about music all the time. Some like this style, some like that. God is in this style, not in that. Some are for drums, some are not. Conventional wisdom says that real worship doesn't happen unless the music style we like is involved. But remarkably, no music style is advocated in chapter 8, where there is an extraordinary revival and worship that is as impressive as any you'll find in the Bible.

Let's look at a fourth challenge to conventional thinking.

THE MESSAGE OF SCRIPTURE LEADS TO JOY

Verses 9-12:

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Some will say that Biblical Christianity is joyless, that it is mostly about putting down those who become excessive about things, that it is a flat and negative version of life, that we're mostly known for what we're against. But clearly this paragraph and the one that follows are anchored in observing joy among believers.

Recently the Gay Freedom parade took place in San Francisco. Some will say that such exuberance is commendable and attractive, whereas the sad Christians huddle together and stamp out every spark of enthusiasm they encounter. But of course in reality it's exactly the opposite. Exhibitionism is not joy. Physically displaying and calling attention to oneself and one's sin doesn't fix anything on the inside, doesn't last, doesn't renew the heart.

Joy comes from understanding who God is and what he is about. If we understand the words of Scripture, if we hear the goodness of the good news, we will be people who are infectiously excited about who God has made us to be and the opportunities we have, and we will be those who invite other people to join in.

That's one of the points Nehemiah makes: Eat something good, drink something sweet, and give some to people who don't have it. This is a sacred day, so be joyful. Sacredness and joy go together. Verse 12 is very helpful to focus on: "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." They had been crying because they had heard the truth and had realized their failure. The call from the leadership was, "Stop crying, stop mourning. The joy of the LORD is your strength." Failure is not the end of the story.

You remember Jesus' most famous, probably best loved, parable, the story of the prodigal son who deliberately ruined his life (Luke 15:11-32). But the ruin was not the end of the story. He went back to be made a slave of his father, and his father forbade him to be a slave. The story ended with a feast. The tragedy didn't win. The witness of the Bible is that we're guilty, but we're not doomed, because someone else has paid the price, and we have an enormous delight to experience and then to share with others.

Crucifixion was not the end of the story of Jesus' life. The resurrection and the ascension followed. Remember the meal that Jesus told us to partake of together to recall his broken body and his shed blood (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20). It's about the price he paid. But what he said at the first communion meal was, "I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). This meal is not only about his death, it's about his victory. The day is going to come when we will eat this meal together, finally, at the great feast. The end of the story is good.

If we understand what we're being taught in the Bible, we will come to the place of joy. Every effort to make Biblical faith something that is filled only with sadness, hatred, narrowness, fear, self-loathing, and restriction is a lie. The people who know the story the best are the most free, the most joyful, and the least likely to shut other people out.

Let's read the last paragraph.

OUR CITY IS NOT HERE

Verses 13-18:

On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths"--as it is written.

So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

The reading of the words of God had reacquainted them with the requirement to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

Leslie and I used to have a neighbor across the street who was the rabbi for the Hillel Society at Stanford. In the seventh month of the Jewish calendar every year, his family would build a booth, a little lean-to, in their back yard and hang fruit from it. They would invite the children of the neighborhood to come in. Faithful Jews have celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles since the time of Nehemiah this way.

But in addition to being a harvest festival, the point of building booths was to remind the Jews that they had once wandered in the wilderness. There had been a time when they had no place to call home, no protection, no city, nothing but God to preserve their identity and keep them safe.

Think of what a remarkable juxtaposition this is. For the first time in more than two generations, Jerusalem was built again. The city was a protection; the walls were up, the gates were strong. For the first time, they might say to themselves, "Ah, we have a home again." But the word of God says, "Remember, in truth your home is nowhere in this world." We are always going to be wanderers. The city we long for, every one of us, is glorious, but it's not here. We are always without a home until we have that home. We are a pilgrim people.

The city must have looked silly. Every rooftop had a booth on it. In all of the city squares people camped out, living in booths of leafy boughs for seven days. After they finally had their city rebuilt, God reminded them, "Don't count on the walls that you've built." Every one of us must always count on the God who is present with us. The place we are headed for is our eternal home, not this world. We shouldn't sink our roots too deep; we shouldn't love too much what this world does for us.

In conclusion I would suggest just a couple of lessons. First, in a short time, these folks had gone from discouragement, sorrow, and hopelessness to becoming a community of people who had a strong degree of commitment to each other, and they had accomplished something they thought was impossible. (It's the brokenness inside, the faithlessness, the loss of hope, the sorrow and selfishness, that holds us back. It's not that God can't work with people even such as these in their hopelessness.) And then they wanted to know God, they longed for the sweetness of God's presence; and in order to find God, they went to the Bible. He is not only there; he can be discovered in other places. But if you and I are passionate for the presence of God in some powerful way, we will not go long without turning to this book to find him, because these words are his love letter to us.

Second, a real understanding of the message of the Scriptures is going to bring joy. We may still be sad. Not everything gets fixed now. But there is an undercurrent that things will be right, and that we can give away the goodness of God to other people because it is lasting, sure, and stronger than any tragedy.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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