

Revival in Listening to and Living the Book (Nehemiah 8)

Preached December 31, 2023, by Pastor Phil Layton (www.gcb.church)

What do you think of when you hear the word revival?

- Maybe a big tent, a crusade, revivalism?
- Is revival something man can plan or produce by music and methods (Charles Finney)?
- If it's a sovereign work of God (as I believe it is), should we pray for revival?
- Do we need reviving? To some, revival isn't wanted ('we're spiritually fine')
 - o to others revival is weird experiences.

I'm using 'revival' for God's moving in renewing spiritual life and growth in a greater way.

- Ps 85 '*Restore us again, O God...revive us again...*' 119:37 '*revive me in Your ways...*'¹

We need God to revive=stir or awaken from apathy or lethargy to live for Him more in 2024.

I grew up in churches singing 'Revive us again - fill each heart with thy love;
May each soul be rekindled with fire from above... Hallelujah, Amen!... Revive us again!'

My dad played on guitar 'The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, He came in mighty fullness then.

His witness through believers won the lost, and multitudes were born again.

The early Christians scattered o'er the world, they preached the gospel fearlessly.

Tho' some were martyred and to lions hurled, they marched along in victory...

Then in an age when darkness gripped the earth, the just shall live by faith was learned.

The Holy Spirit gave the church new birth, as reformation fires burned.

In later years the great revivals came, when saints would seek the Lord and pray.

O once again we need that holy flame, to meet the challenge of today.

*Come Holy Spirit, dark is the hour, we need your filling. Your love and your mighty power,
Move now among us, stir us we pray. Come Holy Spirit, revive the church today.'*

God's Spirit already came at Pentecost to indwell, but we need His ongoing filling and reviving.

- Modern churches need the Spirit to come in love and light in our dark challenging days.
- As we look to this next year, let's long for His empowerment and live on fire for Him.
- May He stir and move among us and bring fresh reformation and revival again, we pray.

Don't let your light go out, Paul says kindle afresh/fan into a flame God's gift (2 Tim 1:6).

- Along with sovereignty is our responsibility, like Ps 85:
'*revive us again...Let me hear what God the LORD will speak...*'

I pray we'll hear God speak today and that He'll revive us in the days and year ahead

Reviving comes from hearing God speak as His Word is preached.

- Faith comes by hearing the Word and faith grows as we come to hear it in the right way.
- As we come to a new year, let's recommit to come prayerfully asking God to rekindle us.

Let's come to hear and heed the Word as it's preached, to better listen and live by the Book.

- God help us grow in taking in His Word.

Revival can happen to the hungry who humbly ask 'bring the Book!'

Ps 19:7 '*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul*' – His law in particular revives souls. In a recent conference on the book of Exodus, a session on reaching young people started with: 'I want to explain why the preaching of the law [Ex 20ff] might be one of the most important things that you can do with this generation. One of my Seminary professors at Southeastern

Seminary claimed that every major awakening in America...owed itself to a renewal of the preaching of the Ten Commandments...if you study the preaching of it...I want you to see why that is and why it will undoubtedly be central also in our next Great Awakening, Lord willing.²

We'll keep preaching God's law in Exodus next year but how should we receive it?

The best place to see that is **Nehemiah 8. Turn there.**

- We could see how Whitefield or Wesley preached the law in revivals,
 - o or how Luther revived law and gospel in the 1500s reformation.

It started much earlier as Israel returned to their land after a long captivity in Babylon, 445 BC.

- Nehemiah is 3 books before the Psalms (middle of Bible, back before Esther and Job).

As Israel rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, God also revived the Word in Jerusalem.

- It came through reading and heeding the law of Moses, starting in Exodus.
- God's commandments were brought to bear in their public square.
- It says in Neh 8:5, as the book was opened, all the people stood.

In that pattern, if you can, please stand as I read: **8:1** *And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to **bring the Book of the Law of Moses** that the LORD had commanded Israel.* ² *So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.* ³ *And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.* ⁴ *And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose...*

Pause there and picture the city square, many thousands of people. I learned the 7th month Jews marked their new year in the fall.³ v. 2 says it was the 1st day, so it's a Jewish New Years day?

Maybe more significant, 1000 years after the Exodus law was given in 1445 BC?

⁵ *And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.* ⁶ *And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.* ⁷ *Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.* ⁸ *They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.* ⁹ *And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and 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 or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.* ¹⁰ *Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."* ¹¹ *So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved."* ¹² *And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. [can be seated]*

This was a new year and a celebration about the declaration of scripture

- I pray next year God does this as we read and preach the next part of His Exodus law.

Last week was how we're redeemed under the law, this week how we can be revived in the law.

- Next week Pastor Corey will bring the book in 1 Pet 2 on hungering for God's Word.
- As a baby longs for milk, you're to long for the milk of the Word so you can grow by it.
- Today's text shows how to grow in hearing God's Word.

Whether Pastor Corey in 1 Peter or Phil in Exodus, other speakers, we wanna bring the book. –

- This is our marching orders and model, read the book, give the sense so all understand.

- Expository preaching is exposing a text and its meaning, explaining it, exhorting from it.
- Exposition is expounding what it meant in its original context, then applying it to today.
- The passage drives the message, the point is the Bible writer's point.

An expositional sermon defines what words mean in context, then what they mean for us

Consecutive exposition is preaching verse-by-verse chapter-by-chapter through a book.

- There's a place for related scriptures, topical studies or expositing a theme (ex: slavery).
- But what God has blessed since Neh 8 is going through books, starting with Moses.
- v. 7-8 names men helping understand it and v. 9 says Levites taught the people.
- v. 12 ends with declaring the words of the book so they're understood and rejoiced in.

The text was read clearly and rightly divided with a response it calls for (here *'don't grieve'*).

- That's our goal too, in studies, small groups, classes or ministries helping grasp and apply
- We want to give the sense and help live in the joy of the Lord that's our strength

Where are you in the process? How can you grow more next year and pursue revival in your soul?

1. Listen Attentively (v. 1-3) v. 1 says they all gathered as one, asking 'bring the book!'

If you look at the end of v. 3 it says *'And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.'*

- One translation says they gathered *'to give attention to the words of the Law'* (v. 13 NIV)
- They stood at attention as the scroll was opened, and gave their full undivided attention.
- Sounds like in Acts, the church was of one accord/mind devoted to teaching (2:42, 46)
- The apostles say we *'will give attention to prayer and the ministry of the word'* (6:4 NIV)
- 17:11 *'they received the word with great eagerness, examining the scriptures daily...'*

10:33: we *'sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.'*

- Revival starts with hearing the Bible. The Word must be central in attention, affections

2 Tim 4:13 'Give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, and to teaching'

In Neh 8 no one *asks them* to come to the book, they're the ones asking for it to come to them!

- It wasn't a rally to change laws, it was a request to hear God's law so they could change.
- It wasn't emotionalism or endless songs they wanted, it was the explanation of scripture.

Not *'bring us current events, cultural commentaries, clever jokes, clowning, comfortable talks.'*

- *'Bring the book!'* God's people want God's man to bring God's Book
- God's truth hurts, it stings, but that's what a faithful believer brings.

People of the book say 'bring it, bring it on, hit me, convict me, bring it to me, bring the word brother!'

The context before this 14 years before, is Ezra ch 7: *Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses ...the hand of the LORD his God was upon him...¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.* [not just practicing what he preached, he practiced it before he preached]

- *'set his heart'* (NIV "devoted himself to the study," NKJV "prepared his heart to seek")
- *'and to practice it'* (or "to do it," like James 1, be a doer of the word, not a hearer only)
- *'and to teach'* (the pattern is learn it – live it – let it out – so others will listen, repeat, etc)

James 1:25 if you look intently at God's law and abide as a doer you'll be blessed

Rowland Hill was a powerful biblical preacher in the 1700s

- But he argued that your duty to listen attentively does not depend on the preacher

- It's not about his delivery or oratorical ability (or lack thereof), it's about the content
 - o what is read or spoken and Who it's from (in this case, a loving Lord).

Hill said for those who may not prefer a certain preacher's delivery, "Supposing you went to hear the will of one of your relatives read, and you were expecting a legacy from him. You would hardly think of criticizing the manner in which the lawyer read the will. Rather, you would be all attention to hear whether anything was left to you and if so, how much. That is the way to hear the [Word] preached."⁴ God always has something for us, a treasure, an inheritance

This is where it starts in Neh 8, 'bring the book!' Is that your cry? Your craving?

2. Listen Reverently (v. 4-6). In v. 5 they stood in reverence, in v. 6 they bow in reverence.

Ezra gave attention and reverence to God's Word and wrote in Ezra 9:4 *everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me...*

- James 1:21: "*in humility receive the Word...*"
- Ezra had a raised platform and they elevated the preached Word that they were all under.
- I'm told churches in Scotland solemnly carried out the Bible, held above all the people.
- Symbolically it's placed on the pulpit before the pastor arrives to communicate
 - o all people, preacher included, are underneath the authority of God's Book.

When you elevate God and His Word, you must lower yourself

⁶ *Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands [as if to lift up the Word?]. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

- A high view of God and His Word drives high praise and humble lowly worship.
- Do you listen with the gravity and weightiness and reverence God's holy word deserves?
- We need serious and sustained honor in our actions and attitudes
 - o while it's preached, before it is preached, and after.

3. Listen Responsively (like v. 6 they answer 'Amen, Amen,' while lifting up their hands).

The book opened, mouths opened in response, and hands opened as if to receive what they love.

- This may shock you who are as still and quiet as possible in church and sit on your hands.
- You don't kneel like Catholics do or get exuberant or emotional like Charismatics do. And you think only Southern or ethnic churches say Amen (good Presbyterians 'ahmen')
- But v. 6 is in the Bible and Ps 134:2 '*lift up your hands to the holy place.*'
- The NT tells men to lift up holy hands to pray (1 Tim 2:8).
- The NT expects us to say 'amen' as God is lifted up in a church service (1 Cor 14:16).
- In Rev 7:12 true worship in glory includes saying 'amen,' and we need to practice!

It would do many of you good to be more engaged and responsive in a message!

- At least nod your head now and then (as long as it's not nodding off in drowsiness!).
- Be a radical Christian by smiling once in a while so I know you're not uptight or upset.
- Respond in some way to show you're listening, write something down, say amen.
- And it's ok and biblical to lift up your hands in worship, and lift your voice in song
- If anything should move us to respond it should be the Living Word of God!
- Our hearts at least should leap in praise, or our souls bow low in response;
 - o why not our lips and lives in some way!

In v. 11 they had to quiet the people and calm them from weeping (ever grieve from the word?).

There's times we should respond in tears or be torn up over our sin we mourn

Wiersbe said we don't 'treat it like the Word of God. We are also in too big a hurry to have the meeting end. In some parts of the world, especially in Eastern Europe before the collapse of the Communist bloc, believers would stand for hours in crowded churches to hear Bible teaching.'⁵

- v. 3 says this happened from early morning to midday, that's several hours of the Word
v. 8 talks about how leaders broke it up: *They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly* [f.n.: with interpretation, or paragraph by paragraph; HCSB *translating and giving the meaning*]

That's how we'll teach through the law next year, interpreting what it means section by section

v. 8 is saying they broke it down for them, not just into sections, breaking down what it meant.

- They explained Hebrew terms some may not have been known living in Babylon.
- They defined what words meant, translating, interpreting, making it clear.
- A preacher isn't an innovator or inventor, he's a waiter who delivers food.
- I don't create or cook the meal, my job is to bring it without messing it up. Your response
 - o Don't just watch; take it in; make it yours, taste and see it's good, chew it, digest it

¹⁰ *Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

- This isn't just the foundation of church preaching, it's the foundation of church potlucks!
- It's what we used to do more and I hope we do more of next year, doing meals together.
- Acts 2 says along with teaching the early church devoted to fellowship and food together.
- And there's a joy of the Lord that was part of their response and would be their strength

I've had a lot of sweets over the holidays but what was most sweet for Israel was the Word.

- v. 12 says they had a celebration with '*...great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*'

Notice also the response in v. 13: heads of household gathered during the week to study.

- They took seriously their responsibility to be equipped to teach and lead their homes.
- Don't leave it to the ladies, be men of the book, step up, speak up, lead in prayer, etc.

4. Live differently in confession and commitment (we see this in rest of ch 8, ch 9-10).

In v. 14-17 Israel responded immediately and obediently and began to live differently.

- They had neglected certain commands and they corrected themselves by the book.
- They didn't just listen the first day, v. 18 says every day of the week they kept hearing it.
- They lived differently literally in booths as the law said, their lifestyle altered that week.
- There were practical changes in how and where they lived and what they did.

Not like a new years resolution to work out or eat better that lasts a week, this kept going

Revival means lasting life-change. If you're revived, you'll live differently, like we see in ch 9:

1 *Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. ² And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³ And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.* [This is 24 days in to the revival, hours for the Word, worship, and confession]

Many of us (myself included) need to grow in prayer next year, and ch 9 is a great help to that.

- It's a prayer about the Exodus story and the exaltation of God they pray to for revival.
- When is the last time you confessed your sin? Even a part of a minute?
- In v. 3 it was a big part of a day.

Have you ever fasted part of a day because of a sin you're craving for more than God?

- You may not read God's book a quarter of a day, but you can start at a quarter of an hour!
- If you read it even 15 minutes every day you can read through the whole Bible in 2024.
- But if you don't deal with sin in confession that will affect your commitment to the book.

Next week Pastor Corey's message will be on putting off sin and growing in God's Word.

- This Bible and sin don't mix. The book keeps us from sin and sin keeps us from the book
Many of us need serious time to confess and forsake our sins from this past year

If you're not praying, reading His word, and repenting regularly, start by confessing that.

- If you aren't doing that, you may not be saved.
- You can't be revived until you've been made alive in Christ, so ask God to give you life.
- Confess your sin and confess Jesus is Lord and commit to Him and what He did for you.
- Christ's death and resurrected life will make you live differently if you trust Him alone.
- James 1 says lay aside all sinfulness and with meekness receive the word

He joins Himself to believers who grow together as they join His local churches

Some of you need to confess you need the body and commit to the church as members in 2024.

You don't see in the Bible community covenants signing names in writing? Look again at 9:38:

Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests... 10:28 The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding,²⁹ join with their brothers

...So the leaders joined their signatures on paper, then people joined with them in the covenant.

- End of v. 29 their covenant commitment was to observe all the Lord commanded together
- In v. 30-31 they commit to raise their children not to marry pagans, and to honor God's day
- v. 32-39 commits to give regularly, end of v. 39: *We will not neglect the house of our God.*

That's very much what our church covenant in writing does. Why wouldn't you commit to that?

- Some of you are holding back growth by not committing,
 - o or you are members, but not serving.

Where are you holding back? Why? Will you confess and commit to live differently next year?

Don't stay in sin, sitting, stagnating - there's strength in the joy of the Lord

Jesus said '*These things I have spoken to you, that **my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full***' (Jn 15:11). That joy of the Lord Jesus is our strength.

- If you hear the word preached and understand it more, thank God right then,
 - o praise Him, rejoice in that privilege many don't have.

Let's pray that God would revive us to hear His Word attentively, reverently, and responsively. And with the Spirit's help, let's live differently in confession and commitment. Revive us again

¹ NASB95, 119:37 ESV 'turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.'

² J.D. Greear, "God's Instruction in the Wilderness (Exodus 19-20)," [TGC23 On Demand](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/tgc23-on-demand) ([thegospelcoalition.org](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org))

³ 'The **seventh month** (Tishri) was an important time in the Jewish calendar during which several events occurred. These events included the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Booths.' -- *CSB Study Bible* (Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 731.

⁴ As told by Charles Spurgeon in *Lectures to My Students* (Zondervan), pp. 391-392).

⁵ Warren Wiersbe. *Be Determined*. An Old Testament study—Nehemiah (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996).