

# Building for Revival

by Robin Wood

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of revival and how it is a sovereign intervention by God upon his people at a particular point in history.*

**Duration:** 37:07

**Scripture:** Nehemiah 8:1-3, Nehemiah 8:5-6, Nehemiah 8:8-10, Matthew 6:33

**Topics:** "Revival"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Ezra reading the book of the law to the people. He emphasizes the sudden and powerful way in which God visited his people during this event. The people responded with reverence and worship, bowing down and lifting their hands in praise. The preacher draws a parallel to the sudden catastrophe of the tsunami in Thailand and Sri Lanka, highlighting the importance of being prepared for God's visitation. The sermon concludes with a reminder to seek God's presence and to learn from the past in order to experience God's visitation in the present.

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## Transcript

We come now to chapter 8 in the book of Nehemiah, the book that we've been going through over the last few weeks. And for those of you who've been with us will know that God's people have come back from a period of exile. They're now in the city of Jerusalem and the walls have been rebuilt and they have settled down.

We come to chapter 8, a remarkable chapter and some remarkable events. Let us read it through. 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. And he opened the book and all the people could see him because he was standing above them.

And as he opened it, the people all stood up as Ezra praised the Lord, the great God. And all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen, Amen. And they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

The Levites, 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. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them, this day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep for all the people have been weeping as they listened to the word of the Lord.

Nehemiah said, go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some of those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to the Lord our God. 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 celebrate with great joy because they now understood the words that have been made known to them.

And on the second day of the month, the heads of all the families along with the priests and the Levites, they gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the law. And 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 and in their courtyards in the courts of the house of God 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. And 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 and they celebrated the feast for seven days and on the eighth day in accordance with the regulation there was an assembly. Let's pray for a moment. Father we've read a lot just a moment ago and it's an amazing story we've read there.

We pray Father that you'll help us to apply this to our situation and learn from the ways in which you've visited your people in the past that we might know you visiting us again today for Jesus sake. Amen. On the 26th of December last year people in Thailand and Sri Lanka and many other nations they went out about their business at the beginning of the day not knowing that within a few moments all of a sudden a catastrophe would happen that would change their lives forever.

And now we know that the tsunami swept in and tragically hundreds of thousands were swept away in that disaster and those who survived will never forget what happened on that day. It was a sudden catastrophic event and there are times it seems that when God comes to his people in the same and sudden way all of a sudden God comes to his people and it seems that this is the case in this incident here. Isaiah the prophet he prays about God coming to his people in Isaiah chapter 64 and he describes it as like when a volcano explodes that's when God comes down to his people.

He prays oh that you would rend the heavens and come down and the mountains would tremble before you as when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil. Come down make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you for when you did awesome things that we did not expect you came down. That was the prayer of Isaiah.

He'd experienced this for himself. God coming in a very special way to his people. It was like a volcano erupting upon them.

It is what we call today revival. It is something that is unpredictable and it takes on different forms at different times in the history of God's people. Very often one man is raised up by God and through that one man God speaks to his people.

That's what happened here with Ezra the priest and the scribe. You may not have heard of a man called Jeremiah Lampia in 1857. God raised up this man in New York.

He was a city missionary there in that city and God put it upon his heart for him to pray and cause people to pray. So he called people together for prayer meetings and the first prayer meeting there were six in attendance. The second prayer meeting there were 20 in attendance and before long prayer spread throughout the city of New York until there were at any one time 6,000 people praying across the city of New York.

It became such a phenomenon that the newspapers were reporting the daily prayer events that were taking place in that city. It was not uncommon at that time for businesses and shops to have notices put up outside. We are closed now for prayer meetings.

Imagine that at Castle Point and in a period of just over 12 months historians tell us that in a population nowhere near as vast as it is today, something like a million people in America alone became Christians. There was an overwhelming presence of God. It was a revival.

Now what do we mean by revival? This is my definition of revival. It's one I've used on many occasions. It is a sovereign intervention by God upon his people at a particular point in history in a visible and powerful way that can only be described as out of the norm.

It's a sovereign intervention. It's something that comes from God. It's not something that we manufacture.

It's God coming to his people. It is to his people. It's not to the world at large.

It's God coming to his people. It's at a particular time in history. It's something that's documented.

There are records of it and particularly in more recent times there are newspaper reports of when this has happened because it's in a visible form. You cannot mistake it. It has happened and it is something so powerful.

Yes it's certainly out of the norm. And this it seems is what happens here in Ezra chapter 8. Because the people without any calling together, they spontaneously having settled down in Jerusalem, they come together in the square by the water gate and they call upon Ezra the prophet to bring the word of God to them. And there's one thing that comes out through this whole chapter in verse 9, in verse 10, in verse 11, and that is this.

This day is sacred. It was something special. It was something that had not happened before.

It was a wonderful time. Something that was to go down in the history of the people of Israel. Now in this account we see some of the features that occur in all periods of revival.

And as we look at it there are also features that we need to note should be in our lives as God's people today. And the first thing that we notice here in verses 1 to 5 is this, that there was an opening of God's word. An opening of God's word, verses 1 down to 3. Ezra the priest, the scribe, he brings out the book of the law.

That was God's word to his people in those days. And he read it to the whole of the company that was gathered there. It wasn't something that he just flitted over.

No, he read it for several hours it seemed. It was from daybreak until noon, and by my reckoning that's at least six hours. He was reading the word of God, the law of Moses, to the people, and they were listening attentively, it says.

They were hearing and understanding what God had said. You see the word of the law of God had been seemingly put to one side for so long. They'd not brought it out, but here they asked, Ezra bring it out.

We want to hear from God. We want to know what God has to say to us today. And in every period when there has been a great revival, it has focused around the word of God, God speaking.

In the 1904-1905 revival in Wales, stocks of the Bible in both the English language and the Welsh language were sold out, so the Bible Society tell us. In 1734 in New England, a man called Jonathan Edwards, nothing to do with the athlete, a man called Jonathan Edwards was preaching there, and people came in their hundreds to hear this man preaching. He was a man of small stature, of very poor eyesight, and when he preached he would almost be reading a script under the light of a candle, but when he preached, God was speaking through his word to his people.

They crowded into the churches and there was such conviction as the Holy Spirit spoke to men and women, and it was said at that time in New England, the whole place was filled with the presence of God. In Northampton, Massachusetts, it is said then that there was not a person left in that whole town who was not converted. In 1859, when revival came to these shores, in London, the churches were crowded because people wanted to hear the word of God.

It was said that the ordinary people, they flocked through to the theatres in London, and there the word of God was preached. St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, they were filled also as the more wealthy people went to hear the word of God in their thousands. We want to hear from God, we go to his word.

Psalm 119 tells us so much about the law of God. Psalm 119 verse 97 says this, O how I love your law! I meditate on it day and night. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, and they are ever before me.

You want to know the word of God, you want to know God speaking, we come back to his word because it's through his word that we hear his voice. And here we find that the people in Nehemiah and Ezra's day, they wanted to hear from God, they wanted to know what God had to say to them. And if we want to hear from God, the first place we must go is to his word.

It will not necessarily bring about a right revival as it did in the day of Nehemiah, but it will bring us back to the one who's at the heart of revival, the Lord Jesus Christ. The second thing that we notice here, a feature that comes out, is that of a call to prayer and repentance, verses five to nine. You see, as the word of God was made clear to them, it was explained to them by the Levites, so it resulted in two responses.

In verse six, prayer, in verse nine, repentance, weeping, repentance, the two things go together. Now in one sense, when we open up the word of God and we ask God to speak to us, we should not be surprised if he does just that. And there should therefore be a response from us when we come to the word of God.

Remember we used to, as children, we used to sing a song that says something like this, God's word is like a hammer that breaks the rock in twain, rather quaint language. No, but the Bible is described, or God's word is described as like a hammer that can break the hardest rock, the hardest heart, it can break apart that which cannot be broken in any other way. It's described as like a mirror so that when we look into the word of God we see ourselves as we really are in the light of God.

It's described also as a lamp. If we want guidance, if we want to know how we should be going in God's way, we come to God's word. It's described as a soul that can pierce through into the very depths of our soul.

And the response here was that the people prayed. They prayed, it says there, the people lifted up their hands and they responded, Amen, Amen, and they bowed down and they worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. And it is always the case in periods of revival, there is much prayer.

Prayer precedes revival, prayer soaks revival, prayer goes on following a period of revival, prayer comes to the forefront, and if we want to know something of God's presence, we need to know something about the ministry of prayer. A few years ago, well back in the, I think it was 1988, Shirley and myself, we were privileged to go to Korea. I was speaking at one or two meetings there and we were taken around the country and one of the pastors there that was shepherding us around, he said, Do you want to come to a prayer meeting? Now Korea is a land that knows revival.

And we said, Oh yes, we'd love to come to a prayer. He said, Right, I'll pick you up at four o'clock in the morning. And he did.

And we went in this minibus and what happened in the next few moments, next few hours, is something that left an indelible impression upon our lives. We've never been in anything like it before or ever since. As we moved down the streets, it was not just one vehicle, but many vehicles, they were moving in one direction and the streets became more full as we moved in this direction.

I thought we were going to a football match on a Saturday afternoon, but this was four o'clock in the morning and they were all heading these people towards this church. And when we got there, there were 6,000 people crowded in that church and many of them had been praying all night. As we looked around there, there were even people up on cupboards.

They were anxious to have a space in that building. And when those people prayed, although we did not understand the language, the presence of God was there in such a way that you could reach out and touch it. God was there with his people.

They prayed. That church, and it was only one of many churches in the country, it had only been started three years ago, there were already 15,000 in membership and it was growing at a rate of 500 persons per

month. That's prayer.

There's another factor here and that's repentance. What do we mean by repentance? What are we talking about here when it seems that it talks about the people here mourning and weeping because God had revealed something to them. As the law had been opened up to them, they realized they'd been coming short of God's law as it had been given to them.

And as God reveals himself to us, as we open up his word in all honesty, we see there two things. One, God is holy and two, we come short of his purposes for us. When we look at God's word, we realize that we, and we're talking here about God's people, we're not talking about people outside, we're talking about those of us who have come to the cross, those of us who've come to the cross and we know that our sin is forgiven, but still there is sin going on in our lives.

We're disobedient to God's law and there are things that need to be dealt with. And that was what was happening here with the people in Nehemiah's day. They were weeping because they realized they come short of God's law for them.

You remember Isaiah as he went into the temple of God and as the presence of God was revealed to him in all his holiness and splendor and glory, Isaiah cries out, woe is me, woe is me, I'm unclean, a man of unclean lips. And when God comes to his people in revival power, it's a time when they know that God is holy and they are sinful and they need to come and be right with God. Every time there's been a movement, amazing things have happened, confession, restitution, many things have to take place when God is there in his presence and power.

In Canada in 1972 there was revival in many places. Many things happened there, the motto at that time was, honest to God, honest to my neighbor. One farmer went and said to his neighbor, I've stolen a cow from you, please forgive me, I will replace her.

The neighbor replied, you need not replace her, I stole one from you as well, please will you forgive me. Swindlers went back to restaurants and hotels admitting they'd gone away without paying and paid their bills. Teachers in colleges and universities declared that the atmosphere in their institutions had changed fundamentally since the beginning of the revival because people were getting right with God, getting right with each other.

A college in America, Asbury College in Kentucky in 1970, a wonderful period of revival took place in this theological institution. I actually have footage of this, newsreel footage of this. The students there, they came together to pray and when they met in the chapel for prayer, God came down to them.

And you see them there in that newsreel footage which was actually put out on the television newscasts. They were on their faces before God, these people, and one and another were going up and they were confessing that there were things wrong, they'd done wrong and they wanted to put things right with one and another in the college because they wanted to have a clean sheet with God and the chapel service that should have lasted half hour went on for over a week. I have a friend, he was a fellow pastor with me in Bangkok, he was in that revival and he tells me the remarkable things happened and it touched a whole community and Father Afield.

The third feature I want to bring out from this passage is this, that there was a celebration then of God's goodness in verses 10 to 12. And here we find that Nehemiah dispels one of the myths about knowing

God, something that many of us were sort of brought up with, that life is to be somewhat miserable, that enjoyment and pleasure is not allowed once you know God. It sort of turns everything up.

That's not what Nehemiah is saying here because Nehemiah said, verse 10, go and enjoy choice foods and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. In other words, go and have a party. That's what Nehemiah was saying.

Go and enjoy yourselves as you now enjoy God, because as the people recognize the greatness of God and they sought to get right with Him, it was a cause for great celebration. And God wants us to enjoy Him. The words of the Westminster Catechism say this, that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

And the best way for us to know true joy in our lives is through knowing Him. And when we know Him in the way that these people knew Him here, the overspill effect is upon the society as a whole, because they went out and they shared what they had with others who had not. There was an overspill of their joy into the society at large.

And when God comes to His people in this way, it is a cause for celebration, because God is great. And when God starts to do things in His people, the overspill is always into society, because the people see that there is something that is happening in God's people. It's something they want.

It attracts them to God's people. And it is indeed a cause for celebration, when crime and drunkenness are drastically reduced in community, as has happened in times of great revival. It is said that in the 1904 revival in Wales, the revival there that lasted just about nine months, it did more to sober up the nation than years of teaching by the temperance movement.

Crime was drastically reduced, and I have cuttings from the Times newspaper, yes the Times newspaper of that time, which speaks about there being a drastic reduction in crime, because of the revival that was taking place in Wales. In Ireland, in 1858, when revival took place there, at one time, white gloves were handed to the magistrates in the courts, because there were no people to be tried. God impacted His people first, and the impact of that flowed over into society.

Oh, what politicians would do for this today, would they not? We talk about bringing back respect. Come back to God, respect follows on. You see, these people, as they understood the truth of God, it affected not only them, but it affected the whole of society.

It gave them great joy, it was cause for celebration. Knowing Jesus is the greatest cause for celebration. As Kendrick puts it, knowing you Jesus, knowing you there is no greater thing, you are my all, you're the best, my joy, my righteousness, and I am thankful.

And we come finally to one other feature, here in this passage, in the final verses down from verse 13 to 18, and that is this. There's a stirring for, I will use the word evangelism, they wouldn't have used that word, but we can use that word, a stirring for taking out God's word to other people. You see, as they went back to the work, to the law of God, they found there were things they weren't doing that they should have been doing.

They should have been celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. It was a command from the law, this was, that they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, so that they remembered the time when God's people, they dwelt in tents in the wilderness. And they remembered God's goodness, and God's provision to them at

that time.

And the law said they should go and spread this message, they should go and take this message to other people. Hang on, does not that sound familiar? Did not Jesus say go into all the world? Did he not give some similar command to you and to me? And indeed every time God has moved in revival power, it has stirred evangelism and missionary activity like at no other time at all. 1727, God came to the Moravian Christians in Germany in a remarkable way.

In fact, they started a prayer meeting, and we talk about a 24-7, theirs went on for 100 years. And as a result of God coming to them and speaking to them, they felt they must share, and they started sending out missionaries across the world within just a few years. And remember there were no planes to get across the world, 300 missionaries had gone from their gathering.

One of those missionaries was a man called Peter Bowler, and he met two disillusioned missionaries on a ship going across the Atlantic. Their names were John and Charles Wesley. And it had an immense impact upon their lives.

And God met them powerfully at Ordersgate Lane Meeting House in London just a little while later. And what God did with them changed the course of this nation in the 18th century. And when revival has come, it has always stirred God's people to go out.

1859, Hudson Taylor founded it. Hudson Taylor was touched by the revival, and he went on to found the China Inland Mission. Mary Schleser went out to Africa.

William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, was affected by the revival. I've met those from the revival in the Hebrides from 1948 onwards, and they've been missionaries in different parts of the world. And you ask me, where is the greatest missionary sending nation today? It's Korea, a land that knows revival.

People in every land going out. In Nehemiah's day, they went out to the hill country, to the towns, to take out the word that God had given to them. Jesus has given to us a great commission, and it is our task today to go to the rural areas, the urban areas, and to take advantage of modern means of communication, so that every person can hear this good news that has affected our lives.

It was indeed, as the passage concludes there, a time of great joy in Jerusalem. In fact, they celebrated on for some seven days, and if we go into the next chapter, which we'll not know, you'll see the celebration continues on there. In fact, it says there that there was never a time like it since the days of Joshua.

God had come to his people. It was a day that was sacred. It was a revival.

Over the past 20 years, I've made it my business to study the subject of revival. I've researched it, I've written about it, I've lectured on it, been to places where revival has happened. I've talked to people from all over the world, from Asia, to Africa, to the Americas.

I've even met some who are veterans of the 1904 Welsh revival and talked with them. And whilst each period of revival is different, one thing comes through. They all say the same.

Once you have met God in revival, your life will never be the same again. I ask the question as we close, what can we do about it? Well, in one sense, absolutely nothing, because revival is something that comes from God. We can't produce it when we can pray for it.

But, on a personal level, we can experience personal revival. As the people turn back to his word, as the people prayed, as they got themselves right before God and their fellow men, as they celebrated God for his greatness and goodness, as they started to take out his message to the people all around, so can we. And that's personal revival.

And when revival starts in us, who knows where it will lead. William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, he died in 1912. And when he died, his funeral cortege, it went past the House of Commons and the Members of Parliament, they put down their business in a mark of respect as the cortege passed by.

William Booth was laid to rest in a small cemetery. And a few months later, a man was seen, an old man with a cloth cap on, walking into that cemetery, and he went to the grave of Booth. And he got down on his knees, and he took off his cloth cap, and he held it in his hand.

And he was heard to pray this, please God, do it again. And my prayer today is this, as we see the state of the church and the nation, please God, do it again, and start with us. Let's pray.

Father, we pray that as we thought about so many things this morning, we pray that you above all else will impact our hearts and lives. May we know that touch upon our lives, upon our church, that will affect us now and affect the whole community in which we live. For Father, we pray that there'll be a turnaround in our nation.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's sing in closing Graham Kendrick's song, Restore O Lord.

Let's make this our prayer as we conclude our service.

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