

Nehemiah 8:1-18

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[0 : 00] Join me in the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8. We are once again taking another break from our study of the book of Romans, and I must tell you why we are doing so once again.

I find that it's not good for the preaching of a church to follow every cultural whim, to bounce from one topic to another as the zeitgeist of social media chaos dictates. We could just go from thing to thing to thing.

But something has been going on in our country that deserves some particular attention because of its particular spiritual claims. On February 8th, at a small private school in Kentucky called Asbury University, a chapel service met beyond its intended conclusion and with little break is continuing to meet even today.

Now, as a little aside, I saw an announcement that they're planning on bringing the meetings to a close and restricting the time and who can attend. This event, though, is being widely referred to as the Asbury Revival.

And so with the limited amount of time that we will spend together this morning, I want us to think biblically together about what constitutes a revival. I think probably most of us in the room have seen or heard something of this.

[1 : 30] If not for you, then I imagine your social media threads are more fun than mine. I will not make any comments concerning the events at Asbury.

I think it's a little early to make many comments about it, to give it a really solid assessment. I want to say just simply this concerning the Asbury Revival that I find it concerning.

I will gladly be proven wrong, and I am praying that it bears much fruit. I would just be happy to have all of my concerns put to rest. But I am concerned.

If you'd like to know more about the particulars of that, I'd be happy to speak with you later. But what I want to do this morning is help us, not so that we can be critical or affirming.

I'm not trying to arm you to get on your social media threads and make pithy comments one way or the other. But so that we can carefully assess claims made in the place in which we live.

[2 : 35] This is a far removed thing from us, but we will need to make assessments of things like this in our day. We need to be a discerning people.

In fact, we're instructed to be a discerning people. Many people would say, don't be critical of things that you're saying. But John instructs us in 1 John 4 and verse 1, beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirit to see whether they are from God.

For many false prophets have gone out into the world. We're told to be discerning and careful. Did you know, for example, that there is a church in Dawsonville that claims to be the home of the North Georgia Revival?

This is an event that has been going on now for some years. Maybe, and I hope that you've been insulated from this, that you're likely to encounter people who would believe these claims.

How are we supposed to think about these kinds of things? Now, we can't have a problem of definition when we think about revival. What is meant by that term, revival?

[3 : 52] It is used in the scriptures, the reviving of things, dead things made alive, or sick things made well. But culturally, a lot of things may pop into your mind when you hear this term.

I once attended a conference for a job I held, not by choice, I was forced to go, that claimed, right, on their introductory statement, on literature that was handed out, we are about to have a good old-fashioned Holy Spirit revival.

Seemed a bit lackluster to me as I attended. A revival is not an event put on a calendar and planned for.

We do not have the power to bring revival about, nor the power to stop it from happening. Just this week, a man said to me, I suggested that I think that if revival were to come to our nation, that it would come through the church.

Just an opinion of mine. That would come through faithful preaching, week in, week out, in a church. And his response was, yeah, but what if the church doesn't want revival?

[5 : 09] And I said, well, I know some churches that do, and we don't have the power to stop it. Revival is a sovereign work of the Spirit of God.

Making things new. Bringing life where there was death. Bringing wellness where there was sickness. Andrew Murray once wrote, a true revival means nothing less than a revolution. Casting out the spirit of worldliness. Making God's love triumph in the heart. J.I. Packer once said, revival is God's quickening visitation of his people.

Touching their hearts and deepening his work of grace in their lives. We want to be clear-minded about what revival is and who brings about revival.

It is a sovereign work of the Spirit of God. But what kind of filters do we need to assess something claiming to be a revival?

[6 : 16] These filters should not be based on our experience. Our thought. It felt like revival. Therefore, it must be revival.

It's not a way that God's people should think. We should rather hold it up to the lens of the Word of God. That's an issue of the sufficiency of Scripture.

You probably have experienced this in your social media threads. Much opinion. Very little Bible.

The Bible is sufficient to help us understand what is and what isn't a work of the Spirit of God.

Paul writes in 2 Timothy chapter 3 verse 16 and 17. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Right? It is an inspired word. It is inerrant. It is authoritative. And then verse 17 says that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

[7 : 23] Which includes the work of discerning the spirits. Putting them to the test. Seeing if something claimed to be a move of God is actually a move of God.

We find, give or take your opinion of it, ten revivals in the Scriptures. And we're going to look at one of them together today.

And I just normatively don't like doing this, although I do from time to time. Yesterday, took a big turn from a plan, from a prepared sermon, to do this instead.

I spent four and a half hours watching video of the events happening in Asbury and pulled this together from Nehemiah chapter 8.

So I hope it will serve us helpfully in these coming moments. Let me give you an outline quickly and I'll reiterate this as we press on before I read the chapter, Nehemiah 8.

[8 : 22] These are evidences of God-sent revival we can find in our text. If revival is God-sent, God's people will, number one, be praying. Number two, they will reestablish the Word of God as the ultimate authority in their lives.

Number three, they will recognize their defiance of God and view His chastisement as just. And number four, they will turn from their defiance to obedience.

They will be praying, the Word of God will be exalted, and they will be repenting and believing. So Nehemiah chapter 8. Beloved, this is God's Word to us, written for His glory and our good.

We would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands.

Nehemiah 8. 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. 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.

[9 : 35] 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.

And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood six men to his right hand. For the time and embarrassment, I'll skip their names.

And seven men to his left hand. Verse 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. 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 worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Verse 7. Also, 13 men, not all the exact same, and Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.

[10:43] They read from the book, from the law of God, clearly. And they gave the sense that the people understood the reading. 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. 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. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy.

Do not be grieved. 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.

On the second day, the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law. And they found it written in the law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seven month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written.

[12:10] So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the water gate, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths. For from the days of Jeshua, the son of Nun, to that day the people of Israel had not done so.

And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

Now, a little background for this chapter. It makes some more sense to us. In the book of Nehemiah so far, in chapter one, we see Nehemiah introduced as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, who was the ruler of Persia.

Persia had overthrown the Babylonian empire, and the Babylonians had carried the Israelites off to captivity. So this is the returning, this is the post-exilic period of the biblical narrative.

[13:24] In chapter one, we see that God brings news of the state of Jerusalem. It's in disrepair. The walls are still torn down from that Babylonian attack.

And therefore, God's people were in a state of disrepair. A couple of waves had been sent back, and Nehemiah is grieved by this.

Not so much because the city is not intact, because the well-being of God's people is not intact. So, Nehemiah is moved to pray for the situation, and God had placed Nehemiah in a very unique position to be trusted by King Artaxerxes as his cupbearer, right?

The one who tasted his wine to see whether or not it was poisoned. King Artaxerxes gives permission to Nehemiah. That's why he's troubled and gives him permission to return back against an edict he himself had given to do the rebuilding of the wall.

Nehemiah chapter one and verse eight records, for the good hand of God was upon him. So, Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem. He's observed the wall.

[14:40] He's reported to the people God's sovereign goodness for the task. We see roughly 30,000 to 50,000 people, Israelites living in the land in this day. And the beginning of the building of the wall has taken place.

The Israelites worked in the face of opposition, for God had given them, chapter four and verse six, a mind to work. And then before we get to chapter eight, the work is completed.

It took 52 days, an astounding feat. And the surrounding nations are now afraid, chapter six and verse 16, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

And so much good has already begun. There's a lot happening with God's good favor leading up to this place.

You could say that maybe the seedbed for revival was already being laid and prepared, but yet we see here in chapter eight, a particular fervency, the pace picks up.

[15 : 52] And so let's think about these four points together as we observe this chapter in the life of Israel. So number one, if revival is God sent, God's people will be praying.

And we have not studied all of the book of Nehemiah together, but there is much praying leading up to this point, particularly by Nehemiah, chapter one, verses five through 11, chapter two, verse four, chapter six, verse nine, and verse 14.

You can turn with me if you'd like, but otherwise just listen. Nehemiah chapter one, verse five and following. This is after he hears the news of the disrepair of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah prays, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

[17 : 11] Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.

They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name and give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man, which is the king.

So we see here Nehemiah praying, right, being brokenhearted, both for the sins of his people and for his own sin, recognizing that God had already been faithful to the scattering, but also calling on God to keep his promises to be faithful in the inn gathering, that God's name would be known.

So this is the thrust of his praying we can see in the book of Nehemiah. We also see the prayers of the Israelites in the book, chapter 4 and verse 9, and then chapter 8 and verse 6, right, a prayer led by Ezra.

We see in verse 6, and Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. I would love a record of that prayer, right? It was a prayer of blessing to the Lord, the great God.

[18 : 50] And all the people answered, Amen, Amen. Yes, let it be so. And they lifted up their hands and they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

So we see in this episode, God's people are praying as revival takes place. Jesus prayed.

It's one to learn from. Luke chapter 6 and verse 12, just one example. In these days, Jesus went out to the mountain to pray. And all night he continued in prayer to God.

Paul instructed the Philippian church to pray. Philippians 4 verse 5 and following. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

God uses the prayers of his people. God empowers the prayers of his people to accomplish the will that he has set forth. Why? Because he pleases to involve us in the process of him doing miraculous things.

[20 : 03] I hope that you've experienced this in your life, praying for some circumstance or for somebody and you see God answer the prayer and all the glory belongs to God, but you've got to be involved in seeing his will come to pass.

A.T. Pearson, who's one of my favorite biographers because he wrote one of my favorite biographies of George Mueller, wrote this, quote, From the day of Pentecost, there has not been one great spiritual awakening in any land which has not begun in a union of prayer.

Wherever the church is aroused and the world's wickedness arrested, somebody has been praying. Charles Spurgeon, whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.

If you may have everything by asking in his name and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is. The rule of the kingdom.

Jonathan Edwards, It is God's will through his wonderful grace that the prayers of his saints should be one of the great principal means of carrying on the designs of Christ's kingdom in the world.

[21 : 16] When God has something very great to accomplish for his church, it is his will that there should proceed at the extraordinary prayers of his people. And then one more quotation on prayer.

Matthew Henry wrote, When God intends great mercy for his people, the first thing he does is set them a praying. So, true God-sent revival will involve prayer.

Prayer that precedes it, prayer that is included within it. Oh, that we would be a people that are praying. Secondly, if revival is God-sent, God's people will reestablish the word of God as the ultimate authority in their lives.

It grieves me today that there are many Christians who take the Bible and mix in other authority, right? Pop psychology, business ideas, the ungodly advice of a friend.

They mix it all together. Instagram memes are really classic for this. God's people will reestablish the word of God as the ultimate authority in their lives.

[22 : 30] Now, remember, we're talking about things that were dead coming to life or things that were sick being made well. And I just in a moment want to encourage you if you already find that this is true in your life, that the word of God is the ultimate authority in your life, you may not need reviving.

You may already have a good and healthy fervency for the things of God. Like we live in a day, I think, where people are looking for experience over and above the regular work of gathering with the church.

The day in, day out revering God's word, opening it together, learning from it, giving it application in our lives. It is just possible that we don't need revival in our church.

But, the word of God must be the ultimate authority. And it will be the ultimate authority in a revival. Paul writes this, 1 Thessalonians 2.13, and we also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you, believers.

People who are in the midst of revival, who have the spirit working in them, will take up God's word and see it for what it really is, the word of God.

[24 : 04] God's very word to man. They will not throw out parts of it. They will want to adhere to it in its entirety.

Hebrews 4, verse 12, for the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the vision of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And this happens, beloved, by the work of the spirit. This is the tool that the spirit uses to bring about revival in people.

The word of God is the spirit's sword. The spirit of God begins working in the hearts of men by first drawing this sword from its scabbard.

The word of God is the supreme rule and authority for our lives. Many people give lip service to the sufficiency and efficacy of the Bible, but yet they do not read it, they do not apply it in the life of their church, and this should not be so.

[25 : 17] So note three things from Nehemiah chapter 8, three observations about the opening of God's word. Notice first their eagerness.

We see a record in verse three that all the people are there. We see men and women and I don't think there's any exclusion for nursery workers. I think they've all gathered together in this place to hear God's word open.

And then in verse one, they told Ezra, the scribe, to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. Right? They built a platform for him just for the occasion to get him high above the crowd that everybody might be able to hear.

And they're gathering for a particular feast. In the Hebrew, and I just hesitate to say these things, I'm sure I'm going to mispronounce it, but Rosh Shoshana, the feast of trumpets.

This is a feast that preceded the day of atonement. They would have known that they were to do this thing because of Ezra's 14-year ministry amongst them.

[26 : 23] He'd already been back there. They had rebuilt the temple and he had been ministering God's word to them already. They had some knowledge that this thing needed to be done and so they are eager and they invite Ezra to come and to teach.

Notice also verse 3, from early morning until midday, and we don't know the exact time of early morning, but it was likely around sunrise, all the people, including the littles, get this in your mind, five to seven hours the law of God was opened and it was read.

And not only that, notice in verse 13, there's a second day, maybe perhaps for logistics, I'm not sure, but this time the heads of household come back to learn more and I would imagine then disperse that teaching amongst the people.

They're eager that God's word would be opened to them. Notice also their reverence, verse 5, as he opened it, all the people, stood.

I don't think this is a prescriptive thing, right? Some traditions always stand when God's word is read. I'm not concerned about our bodily position, but the position of our hearts as the scripture is opened to us, right?

[27 : 49] They revered it, they respected it, they knew it was the very words of God himself. And so they treated it with reverence. they were hungry for this thing that was being opened before them.

Perhaps it's possible that we have too much Bible, too many copies, too much access. There are people in the world that travel great distances and spend vast amounts of time to be around the reading of the scripture who longed to hear it opened up for them.

And yet we, and I'm guilty of this just the same, try to compress our time down, right? Got things to do, places to go. We don't revere the coming together and opening up God's word the way I would suggest we should.

Notice also verse six, the lifting of their hands and the bowing of their heads, right? Their prostrate, faces to the ground, a position of reverence which communicates we are not worthy to be in your presence.

God's word opened, right? Prostrate on the ground. And notice also as they're eager and they're reverent, notice their responsiveness, right?

[29 : 08] They're actually hearing the word, they're understanding the word as it's being explained to them and they have a response to that. Last part of verse nine, for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law.

As Ezra and the other men read and explained, helped them to understand, they recognized that they had transgressed this good law of this merciful God and an ever-widening chasm opened between them and him.

Like they wept over it, over their sinfulness. But, they are told not to weep, right? This celebration, this feast of trumpets preceded a time, preceded a time of repentance, but it was meant to be a time of rejoicing because it looked to the day of atonement.

So they're commanded in verses nine and ten and eleven to there to be holiness and joy, right? To look toward the future promise of the atoning work of Christ.

Their sins would be forgiven, that their relationship with God would be restored. There will be no revival amongst people who do not love, read, hear, and proclaim the words of the living God.

[30 : 42] Ask me if I think something is of the spirit, I will say to you, how much exaltation of Christ through his word is happening.

This is what the spirit does. He exalts Christ using the word. Number three, if revival is God sent, God's people will recognize their defiance of God and view his chastisement as just.

Again, we see verse nine, this weeping, this concern as they heard the words of the law. And then we look further in Nehemiah chapter nine.

There's an extended prayer there. The first two verses of Nehemiah nine says, now on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, right?

Outward signs of repentance and with earth on their heads and the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins in the iniquities of their fathers.

[31 : 49] There will be repentance if revival is happening. People will be confessing their sin and turning from it.

Verse 33 of chapter nine says, yet you, speaking of God, have been righteous in all that has come upon us. For you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

There's going to be a preaching of the word. There's going to be a returning to God through repentance and faith if revival is happening. Second Corinthians chapter seven verse eight and following Paul says, for even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it, though I did regret it, for I see that the letter grieved you though only for a little while.

As it is, I rejoice not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief so that you suffered no loss through us.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment.

[33 : 09] At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. When revival comes, people will be grieved for their sin. They will repent and they will turn to God in obedience.

Jonathan Edwards wrote a great little book. If this thought of revival is on your mind and you want to read and study more about it, Jonathan Edwards was one of the Puritan pastors, New England, that was part of God's bringing about what's called the great awakening.

And he wrote a great little book called A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God. One of the All-Time Best Book Titles, A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.

And there in it he wrote about godly grief. There is a great deal of difference in the distinctness of these awakenings. Some people who have not had such a clear sight of God's justice in their condemnation still mention things that plainly imply it.

They develop disposition to acknowledge that God is just and righteous in declaring that he will inflict punishment on those who sin. They know that they are undeserving of his comforts.

[34 : 23] Many times though they did not have such a clear sight of it at the beginning they have very clear discoveries of their unworthiness soon after their conviction along with being made humble in the dust before God.

They're grieved over their sin. They see God's wrath as just before them. And in other places in the text he talks about them turning to God for the mercy he shows in Christ.

So fourthly and lastly if revival is God sent God's people will turn from their defiance to obedience.

Verse 14 we see them discover the feast of booths right?

It's a feast that has not been kept for a long time and they decide to celebrate this feast. It's a feast that was designed to remind them of the way that God cared for their ancestors when they tarried in the desert after being delivered from Egypt.

So they set up booths or tents, temporary structures, and they dwell in them all over the city. The mark of Christian maturity.

[35 : 35] And this is why it is dangerous to call something a revival that has yet to be given time. the mark of Christian maturity is not how much you know or feel how expressive you are, but what you do with what you know.

Do you faithfully pursue God having turned from your sin, turning to the righteousness that is found in Christ? Notice the result of their obedience, verse 17.

Now, this is obedience. This is obedience brought joy. They've been doing something. They've been active. They've been going out of the city and gathering up wood and bringing it in and building things and celebrating, cooking food, doing all this stuff.

They've been obedient over time and verse 17 says, there was great rejoicing results in joy that couples with their obedience.

so, beloved, we need to be discerning. We need to have a biblical lens for which to run claims of spirituality in our day.

[36 : 48] We must be thoughtful. We must be hopeful. We certainly must pray. May we be a people who pray for revival, for our local communities, for our region, for our country, and for the world.

May we be a people who are discerning of the claims of revival for the good of people, and for the glory of our God. And may we be a people who embrace revival, if and when it comes.

Let's pray together.