

Main Idea: In today’s text we’re going to see a powerful illustration of the necessity of God’s Word for true revival. The revival that happened in Nehemiah 8-10 took place in three phases, each related to the Word.

I. Phase #1: The revival involved the exposition of the Word on Day 1 (8:1-12).

--A strong nation is a nation that has a strong spiritual life.

--We must not only *hear* God's Word. We must *understand* God's Word.

II. Phase #2: The revival involved the application of the Word on Day 2 (8:13-18).

--Here are two questions we should always ask when we hear God's Word. One, what does it *mean*? That's interpretation. And two, how does it *apply* to my life? That's application.

--When true revival occurs, God's people get serious about putting God's Word into practice in the nitty-gritty area of their lives.

III. Phase #3: The revival involved the implementation of the Word on Day 24 (Ch 9-10).

A. The people made confession for their disobedience to the Word (9:1-37).

B. The people made a commitment to obey the Word (9:38-10:39).

Make It Personal: What are you doing with the Word of God?

1. Make a commitment to place yourself in it.

2. Make a commitment to place yourself under it.

3. Make a commitment to build your life on it.

In 1737 Jonathan Edwards wrote a little book entitled, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton and the Neighboring Towns and Villages of New Hampshire, in New England*. As the title suggests, in the book Edwards tells the story about what happened during a period of his ministry as a pastor when the Spirit of God moved in the hearts of hundreds in his town and thousands throughout New England.

What causes revival to spread like wild fire? Here’s the answer that Jonathan Edwards gave concerning what happened in his day, “There is no one thing I know of which God has made such a means of promoting his work amongst us, as the news of others’ conversions. This has been owned in awakening sinners, engaging them earnestly to seek the same blessing, and in quickening saints.”¹

That’s important. The Spirit of God uses the telling of the stories of what He has done in people’s lives to create a hunger in the hearts of other people for that same working. Specifically, Edwards says that He uses the spreading of stories about the conversion of sinners to awaken other sinners to their need for conversion, and also the stories of awakened saints to light a fire in other saints who need reviving.

Here’s one of the main reasons for our current series. We are looking at accounts in the Bible of what God did in the past to bring spiritual awakening to spiritually dull or dead people, and in seeing what He did for them, we are encouraged to seek it from Him for ourselves.

In his book *Campus Aflame*, J. E. Orr describes the amazing work God's Spirit produced a century ago:²

The fifteen years following 1899 proved to be years of great spiritual awakening around the world. The greatest such movement, without a doubt, was the Welsh Revival of 1904 onward. Its leading figure was a 26-year old student,

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, p. 355.

² J. E. Orr, *Campus Aflame*, p. 101.

Evan Roberts, who had enjoyed a remarkable experience with God before enrolling at Newcastle Emlyn College.

With the permission of his college principal, Roberts left his studies and proceeded to his home and church in the village of Loughor, not far from Swansea. Only seventeen people waited to hear his first message. But he gave them four points--to confess any known sin to God and put right any wrong done to man; to put away any doubtful habit; to obey the Spirit promptly; and to confess faith in Christ openly. The response was instantaneous.

Within three months, a hundred thousand converts had been added to the churches in Wales. Five years later, a book debunking the Revival was published, and the main point made by the scholarly author was that of the 100,000 added to the Churches, only 80,000 stood after five years.

The influence of the Revival upon life in Wales was beyond calculation. Crime was so greatly diminished that the magistrates in certain counties were presented with white gloves, signifying not a case to try. Drunkenness was cut in half, and a wave of bankruptcies swept the taverns of the principality. Profanity was curbed, until it was said that the pit-ponies in the mines could not understand their orders.

When I hear an account like that, I find myself saying, "I want that. I need that. We need that." I believe that we need that kind of revival today in the church in America.

We can't cause revival. But we can and must cooperate with the Spirit as He works to accomplish the Father's work in our midst. There are certain ingredients that are always present in genuine revival. We've been seeing these ingredients in our current series entitled, "*Revive Us Again!*"

Thus far we've examined the revival under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29, the revival under Josiah in 2 Chronicles 34, and the revival under Asa in 2 Chronicles 15. We've seen several common factors associated with revival:

1. Revival starts with a godly leader.
2. Revival involves a turning from sin by God's people.
3. Revival involves a turning to God by the people of God, in prayer, and in a proper response to the Word
4. Revival results in great joy.

This morning, we're going to investigate one of the most dynamic accounts of revival that God's people have ever experienced. If ever a country needed revival, it was Israel in the fifth century BC.

Here's the setting. Israel had forsaken God, yet again. The story of Israel's history is like a spiritual roller coaster. Up and down. The Israelites live for God under David, then forsake Him later under leaders like Rehoboam. Asa restores them. Manasseh and Amon lead them astray. Josiah does what's right. But it's too late. In 586 BC, just as God warned, the people of God went into captivity in Babylon, for seventy long years of judgment. During that time their promised land was plundered, the holy city of Jerusalem decimated, and the temple ransacked.

If ever God's people needed revival, it was Israel 450 years BC. In a sense, the revival that came started in the heart of one Jewish man. He was living in Babylon. He heard the news about the horrid conditions in Jerusalem. That news devastated him. That news drove him to his knees. That man was Nehemiah.

The revival that happened in Nehemiah's day took place in three phases, which we'll see in Nehemiah 8-10, and each phase is linked closely to the ministry of the Word of God.

I. Phase #1: The revival involved the exposition of the Word on Day 1 (8:1-12).

A word about the background. True to His Word, God brought a remnant of Jews back to Jerusalem once the seventy years of captivity ended. Ezra came back in 458 BC, and the book of Ezra the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah came back thirteen years later in 445 BC, and the book of Nehemiah records the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem.

The order is significant. Ezra was a priest, and when he came to Jerusalem he found the moral and spiritual conditions of the people to be very poor. So he started teaching them God's Law (see Ezra 9-10), and the people started cleaning up their lives.

Then Nehemiah showed up, and he built the wall to provide some safety and security in the capital city. That's Nehemiah 1-7. Once the wall was done, the people came to Ezra again and asked him for more teaching from God's Word. And then came the revival.

So the revival involved these two great men of God. Ezra the priest/scribe, and Nehemiah the governor. Ezra brought the Word to the people, and Nehemiah helped the people live the Word in real life.

The revival took place in the seventh month in the Jewish calendar (7:73). Notice how it happened according to Nehemiah 8:1, "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."

Here's what happened. The people gathered together in Jerusalem. The wall is done, and the people request that Ezra read the Book of God's Law to them.

Notice two significant things: One, who requested the Word? The people did. They hungered. They wanted to hear God's Word. Yes, the city walls were built. But strong walls are not enough for a strong nation (nor a strong military, or good economy). *A strong nation is a nation that has a strong spiritual life.*

And two, where did the gathering take place? It doesn't say "in the Temple Court," but rather, "before the Water Gate." Why there? The gate was the center of life in ancient days. Business took place at the gate. Political decisions were reached at the gate. And it was there that God's guidelines needed to be heard.

This is key. This would be a revival that moved God's Word into the real life of the people. It's sad, yet true. Far too often, that doesn't happen. God never intended His Word to be merely a "Sunday Book."

Now watch what happened on Day 1. We see the exposition of the Word beginning in verse 2, "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."

Ezra exposed the people to God's Word! All the people, young and old. For how long? Verse 3 tells us, "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."

You say, "How could so many people hear Ezra?" Where was Ezra when he read? Verse 4 explains, "Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion." And to his right stood six men, and to his left seven others.

How did the people react when Ezra opened the Book? Verse 5 says that when Ezra opened the book, "The people all stood up." Why did they stand? Out of reverence for the Book and the One who gave it.

And notice the reaction of the people in verse 6, "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."

So Ezra exposed the people to the Word by reading it, and the mere reading of it produced a powerful effect on the people. Friends, this is a one of a kind Book!

But that's not all that's involved in the exposition of the Scriptures. We must not only *hear* God's Word. We must *understand* God's Word.

Who helped the people to understand what they heard? Ezra's thirteen associates did, as verses 7-8 explain, "The Levites [and their names are listed]. . . instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read."

And what happened when the people understood the Scriptures? The end of verse 9 records that ". . . all the people wept when they heard the words of the law (KJV)." They wept! They were gripped in their hearts.

At this point Nehemiah stepped forward. What did he tell them? Listen to verse 10, "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 reinforced this in verse 11, and the effect was obvious, as verse 12 indicates, "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."

You talk about an open air meeting! There's a great illustration of the power of God's Word. The reading of the Scriptures, followed by the teaching of the Scriptures, and the people are first convicted, then rejoicing.

That's the same thing that happens today when God's Word falls on receptive hearts. There's conviction of sin, transformation of lives, and joy!

May I remind you there were no gimmicks in this revival? No dimmed lights. Not even any music! No testimonies from "super-saints." Just spiritually hungry people listening to the Word of God!

Perhaps you're thinking, "Well I've seen people get excited about God's Word before. But it wears off. It doesn't last, does it?"

I'll confess, my heart is heavy when I think of the times I've seen people hear God's Word, get excited about it, make promises to change...only to fizzle out in time. Not a few times, but *many* times. What went wrong? There are many factors, but here's a primary one. Jesus warned, "He who has ears, let him *hear* (Matt 13:9)."

It's possible to *listen* and not *hear* God's Word. I mean *really* hear. How can you tell if a person has heard with a prepared heart?

I once heard Howard Hendricks tell the story about one of the leading lung cancer research specialists in the world. This brilliant man was world renown for his insight into what causes lung damage. Dr. Hendricks knew him personally. And Dr. Hendricks also performed his funeral. The sad piece of the story is this. Do you know the reason this cancer specialist died? He smoked. He knew the hazards better than anyone else. He knew the facts, but he refused to make application.

Hearing God's Word does little good without the application of the Word. That brings us to phase two.

II. Phase #2: The revival involved the application of the Word on Day 2 (8:13-18).

On Day 1, everyone was present. Who met on Day 2? Verse 13 says, "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."

That's interesting. On Day 2, *the leaders* approached Ezra and wanted to know how to apply what they'd just heard. "What difference should this make on our lives, Ezra?!"

Here are two questions we should always ask when we hear God's Word. One, what does it *mean*? That's interpretation. And two, how does it *apply* to my life? That's application.

I believe there are people in this community that are hungering for the meat of God's Word. They are looking for a church that is more than a Sunday social club. They're tired of hearing entertaining stories from the pulpit and in Sunday School classes. They're not interested in clever and cute opinions. They have an insatiable desire to be fed with the meat of God's Word. They want to know what the Bible says, and how it applies to their lives.

That was true of the Jewish leaders in verse 13. They came to Ezra with the burning question, "Now what Ezra? We've heard the Word. What needs to happen next?"

Guess what they found when they came to the Law with that teachable spirit? Verse 14 says, "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."

There were three great annual Jewish feasts commanded in the Torah where all Jewish men were to assemble in Jerusalem: Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles). The Feast of Booths was a joyous seven day festivity. It celebrated the completion of the harvest.

The Rabbis said, "He who has not seen Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles does not know what rejoicing means."

God commanded His people to observe the Feast of Booths in Leviticus 23:39-43. Every year, in the seventh month, they were to commemorate their redemption from Egypt by living in booths made out of branches for seven days. It was not an option, but a command of God.

Here's the point. *When true revival occurs, God's people get serious about putting God's Word into practice in the nitty-gritty area of their lives.* It's called application.

So it was with the Jewish leaders (8:14). They discovered truth in God's Word they'd been neglecting. So they said, "Let's do it." And their resolve spread to the people.

Verse 16 says, "So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths..." So the people obeyed God's Word. "And their joy was very great," concludes verse 17.

Something else transpired during the seven day celebration. A Bible conference. Look at verse 18, "Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God." Wow! The people couldn't get enough of God's truth!

Friends, we're seeing something here we must not miss. God's Word truly is sufficient to transform people's lives.

What can bring hope to a family in the midst of crisis? God's Word can. What can liberate the life of a person who's enslaved to alcohol? God's Word can. What can rejuvenate the soul of a person who's given up on life? God's Word can.

What can produce new life in a church that's barren? God's Word can. What can transform a nation from spiritual apathy and generate God-honoring righteousness in the lives of its citizens? God's Word can.

We're seeing it happen right here. Again, the revival in Nehemiah took place in three phases. It started with the exposition of the Word, followed by the application of the Word.

III. Phase #3: The revival involved the implementation of the Word on Day 24 (Ch 9-10).

God didn't give us His Word so we could debate it, dissect it, or impress people with our knowledge of it. He gave it to us to direct our lives. We must implement God's Word.

"This book shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night that you may observe to DO according to all that is written in it." (Josh 1:8)

"Order my steps according to Thy Word, and let not any iniquity have dominion over me." (Ps 119:133)

"Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you," said Jesus in the Great Commission (Matt 28:20)

So we must implement God's Word. That's exactly what the people did in Nehemiah 9-10. How? By taking two practical steps. They made a *confession* and a *commitment*.

A. The people made confession for their disobedience to the Word (9:1-37).

Here's something you don't see every day. Look at 9:1-2 "On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers."

Corporate confession. Amazing. And what produced it? What brings cleansing to lives? What heals the destructive effects of sin? God's Word does.

And true confession isn't flippant either, as verse 3 demonstrates, "They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God."

Notice how they spent their time. They spent three hours or so in the Word, and then they spent another three hours or in confession and worship.

That's significant! The people spent three hours placing themselves under the Scriptures, and then three more hours responding to the Scriptures. The more they looked into the Word, the more they saw God's holiness and their own unholiness. The more they gazed into the Scriptures, the more they realized that the pain they had experienced as a nation was due to one thing, their disobedience to God's commands.

And that's what made the cross necessary, beloved. God's holiness and our utter sinfulness. God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to be our sin-bearer. Jesus the Christ died to reconcile us to a perfect God. He took our place. He died as our substitute. How do I know? *For the Bible tells me so.*

For the Israelites, there was but one appropriate action to take. What happened in 9:4-37? In verse 4, the spiritual leaders "called with loud voices to the LORD their God."

A grand praise service followed. The Levites led in the worship. Beginning in verse 5, they praised God by rehearsing what He had done in the history of the nation of Israel. They said: "Blessed be your glorious name (5)... You are the LORD God who chose Abraham (7)... You made a covenant with him (8)... You rescued the Israelites from Egypt (9-10)."

And then their praise took them to Sinai. What had God given them at Sinai? Verse 13, "You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave

them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good." In essence, "You gave us Your Word!"

But what did the people do? Verse 16, "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands." Verse 17, "They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them."

Interesting term... "*stiff-necked*" (mentioned twice, in verses 16 & 17). The figure of speech comes from the farm scene. It refers to the driving of stubborn oxen that resist the master's guidance.

Growing up I raised 4-H calves. One of the great challenges every spring was to put a halter on an 800 plus pound animal and try to lead it. Sometimes you'd pull and yank and scream trying to get that calf to follow your lead. I knew of people that had calves so stubborn they tied their halter to a truck or tractor and literally drug the animal! Why? A stiff-necked calf needs to learn to follow its Master.

God took drastic measures to get His stiff-necked people to follow Him. Not because He's an ogre, but because He knows what's best. He wants what's best for us.

Verse 19, "Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert." Verse 20, "You gave your good Spirit to instruct them."

God is so good!

But what did the people do time and time again to God and His Word? Verse 26, "But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies."

Verse 29, "You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them."

Just how bad was it? Verse 34, "Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them."

You say, "What does all this have to do with implementation?" Watch carefully. Here's what the people are saying to God in Nehemiah 9, "We have sinned. The reason we're in distress today is because we, just like our fathers, have disobeyed your Word. We have been stiff-necked. We confess our sin to You today!"

The first step in implementation is to take a take a good look at your life in the light of God's Word, and to confess your shortcomings to the Lord, and to accept His forgiveness. And know this. No matter what you've done, God extends forgiveness to you through Jesus Christ!

Take inventory. Is there any area in your life in which you are disobeying God's Word? Is there anything that the Bible prohibits that's in your life? Any unbiblical practice? Any unbiblical attitude? Any unbiblical value? Any unbiblical belief? If so, confess it to the Lord right now. Don't wait.

But don't stop there. Implementation involves a second step after confession, that is, a commitment.

B. The people made a commitment to obey the Word (9:38-10:39).

Look what the people said next in 9:38, "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement ["a sure covenant" in the KJV], putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."

This is key. The people made a commitment that day, a covenant. What was involved in this covenant? You can read 10:28-29 for the answer. In essence, the people said, "We're going to follow God's Word from now on. We're going to do what God says."

You see, implementation involves a personal commitment, "I'm going to obey God!" Total surrender. Total obedience.

Now answer this. What do you see in 10:1-27? I see a bunch of names! 84 names to be specific. 84 individuals, some leaders, some priests, some Levites, and some laymen.

Okay, why is that list of names included here? 84 people put their name on the dotted line. 84 men said, "We mean business about living for God! From this day forth, we're going to live our lives in obedience to God's Word."

Let's be honest. We've got a problem. We're living in an age of wariness. Most people are afraid of making public commitments. We've turned religion into a "personal" matter. We shy away from public accountability.

It's intriguing to me that according to surveys, between 75% and 85% of the persons who become inactive church members do so in the first year of their membership.³

Why is that? There are various reasons, but one is this. The people who join a church and truly get involved in the life of that church are the ones that *stick*. The people that take ownership in the life of the church, that come to all its services, that participate in its ministries, are the ones that are there for the long haul.

But those that don't get involved soon sneak out the back door, often never to be seen again.

Are you willing to be accounted today, to acknowledge publicly, "I want to proclaim allegiance in my life to Jesus Christ. I want to be accountable to obey His Word. And I want to show it by obeying His instruction to make His local church the priority He wants it to be in my life."?

Perhaps you've been straddling the fence. I would challenge you to follow the example of 84 individuals, from Nehemiah to Baanah, who said, "We're going to live our lives according to the Book!"

You'll never regret it.

What prompted revival in Ezra's day? The ministry of the Word of God did. Exposition led to application which resulted in implementation. Let's renew our commitment today to be *biblical* Christians and to be a *biblical* church.

Make It Personal: What are you doing with the Word of God?

I urge you to make three vital commitments.

1. *Make a commitment to place yourself in it.* Get in the Word every day.
2. *Make a commitment to place yourself under it.* Be under the Word every Lord's Day.
3. *Make a commitment to build your life on it.* Be a doer of the Word.

³ Win Arn, 24