

Ezra and Nehemiah What Does Revival Look Like?

(Read Nehemiah 12 v 27-43 and Ezra 10 v 1-4)

Today we're asking the question, what does revival look like? When God is at work in human hearts what kind of results might we expect in individuals, communities, societies? Our answers are to be found in our OT readings from around 450BC when Ezra and Nehemiah were leading God's people to rebuild Jerusalem and prepare for the coming Messiah. Let me summarise some of what happened under three headings – Penitence, Joy and Change.

Firstly **Penitence**, a godly sorrow because things are not as they should be. We read in each case where Ezra and Nehemiah were told of the bad state of things in Jerusalem they were distraught and grieved deeply. Parts of the city were still in ruins, the people were divided and demoralised, everyone just looking out for themselves. A very key part of being a spiritual, godly person is to feel this distress over sin and its consequences. We cannot be satisfied until things are set back on track, until people walk once more in paths of righteousness and justice rolls out like a never failing stream.

These men responded by devoting themselves to fervent prayer. Their sorrow drove them to their knees in confession of their sins before God, and the sins of their people. Their deep penitence drove them to plead earnestly with God for His grace and mercy. They didn't take it for granted but prayed for the assurance of it.

Throughout history times of revival have always featured earnest praying. The 1859 Revival in Ulster began with just a few people gathering faithfully in a schoolhouse in Kells to seek God's forgiveness and favour. In Wales in 1904 church buildings remained open around the clock to accommodate crowds who packed in for hours on end to pray.

Another thing we've noted in the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah was a new attention to God's Word. On occasions Ezra would read from the scriptures to large gatherings and some of the Levites would help explain it to the people. And the people gladly came and listened carefully with a new hunger to know and understand what God had to say. Initially the information added to their sorrow as they realised how far short they were of God's standards and how serious their sin was.

But this penitence from the Holy Spirit drove them to keep listening and searching the Scripture until they found peace for their souls. In 1859 many Irish Presbyterians returned to church in the afternoon and evening. There was no evening service in those days but crowds would come and knock on the manse door asking the minister to preach to them again from the Bible for they felt a need to be assured of salvation. They needed to know they were right with God.

In time this sincere penitence was rewarded with great **Joy**. Ancient Israel celebrated their festivals with renewed happiness. God had not abandoned them. He was not only holy but also compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving mercy. Relieved of their burden of guilt, people began to experience the peace of God that passes understanding, gratitude in the present and new hope for the future.

Today's reading describes one occasion of great national happiness where huge crowds were led in singing worship by two choirs and music groups, encircling the city with a mantle of praise. Men, women and children, the whole population rejoiced in God's loving kindness. They gave Him glory, loudly, and neighbours couldn't help but notice.

Some may sneer at this kind of religious enthusiasm. They may scoff and think people like this are simple minded or crazy altogether. But as many more are compelled by their witness, convicted of their own sin and need and are prompted to seek God for themselves.

It's estimated 100,000 people made adult commitments to trust and follow Jesus during the Welsh Revival. Just as palpable as the penitence and sorrow for sin was the joy when people came to know the Saviour Who carried our sin and His victory over death. We have sorrow over *our* failing but great joy in *His* atonement on our behalf, His triumph over evil and promise of eternal life. Filled with His Holy Spirit our hearts swell in appreciation of Him.

There is a third important thing to note from these scripture readings today and it is the need for **Change**. When God revives our hearts and minds by His Spirit of truth things cannot remain the same. Jesus preached that people should '*Repent and believe the Good News*'. 'I don't condemn you,' He said on one occasion, '*but you must leave your life of sin.*'

This can be costly. It may mean real sacrifice. Some of these OT people had welcomed foreign wives and their religions. It was painful but they could not continue with that. When we begin to appreciate God's amazing grace and what it cost for us to be forgiven we cannot keep sinning! How can we insult

with fresh or prolonged disobedience the One Who loves us and gave Himself for us?

Revival brings change as peoples' consciences are realigned to please the Lord. In the Belfast shipyard new sheds were constructed to house the huge number of stolen tools that were returned. Police in Wales reported little to do as the crime rate dwindled, courts had very few cases to hear. Pubs went out of business as the demand for alcohol fell. In the coal mines the pit ponies were confused because miners didn't swear anymore.

Spiritual renewal often prompts social reform. The abolition of slavery and development of the modern welfare state owe much to the evangelical faith of social campaigners.

When we come to know Jesus, we don't want to do wrong anymore. We desire that which is good and pleasing to God and we naturally want others to share the benefits of His generous grace.

Could we dream a little today? Could we dream of a town where we can walk down the street and not hear God's name blasphemed, a town where women are respected and children are safe, a town where people invest their money in generous community and charity rather than throw it away on more drink?

It can be more than a dream. It became reality in Jerusalem 450 years BC and in many times and places since. It could again, if God's people return with all our hearts to the Lord our God in penitent prayer.

Amen