

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 13
Religion and Revival (Nehemiah 8:13–18)

June 10, 2007

Pastor Mark Driscoll

And there was very great rejoicing.

— Nehemiah 8:17

After lying in ruins for 141 years, the city of Jerusalem was finally rebuilt in fifty-two short days thanks to God's grace, Nehemiah's leadership, and the faithful service of God's people. Shortly following completion, roughly 50,000 people moved back into the city as recorded at the end of Nehemiah 7. The first half of Nehemiah 8 then reports of a revival sparked by a sermon that lasted anywhere from five to six hours. This week, we see the fruit of repentance—lives of obedience. This obedience is motivated by delight rather than drudgery.

True revival turns the hearts of the fathers to their children

¹³On 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.

Ezra, the spiritual leader of God's people in Jerusalem, wisely brought the men (who were the heads of their homes) together to instruct them on God's principles for lovingly caring for their wives, children, and grandchildren. This is exactly what the closing lines of the Old Testament promised would occur when the good news of Jesus was understood—fathers' hearts would be inclined toward their children. This principle is incredibly timely in our day when men have in large part neglected their Christian duties. For example, a George Barna report from March 6, 2000, called "[Women Are the Backbone of the Christian Congregations in America](#)" reported the following:

Men are the senior pastors of more than nine out of ten Protestant churches (and, of course, 100% of Catholic churches). However, a new nationwide survey from the Barna Research Group suggests that women shoulder most of the responsibility for the health and vitality of the Christian faith in the country.

Without women, Christianity would have nearly 60% fewer adherents. The survey data show that nearly half of the nation's women have beliefs which classify them as born again (46%), compared to just about one-third of men (36%). In other words, there are between 11 million and 13 million more born again women than there are born again men in the country.

Christianity is still the "faith-of-choice" among Americans, but particularly among women. When asked to identify their religious affiliation, 9 out of every 10 women nationwide (90%) said that they consider themselves to be Christian (compared to 83% of men).

One of the characteristics of women that emerges from the research is their high degree of spiritual depth. Nearly 8 out of every 10 women (79%) said that the term "spiritual" describes them accurately (contrasted with just 63% of men). Almost 7 out of every 10 female respondents (69%) resonated with the phrase "deeply spiritual" (among men, it was only 50%).

Perhaps even more indicative of women's sense of spiritual focus, 41% of women said that they have set specific spiritual goals that they hope to accomplish in the coming year or two; only 29% of men have identified such spiritual objectives.

Women are also more likely to acknowledge a significant faith commitment. Three-quarters of women (75%) said that their religious faith is very important in their life. That compares to just 3 out of every 5 men (60%) who indicated that their religious commitment is a critical aspect of their life.

Although women account for half of the U.S. adult population, they represent a majority of religiously active individuals in 12 out of the 13 religious activities examined. Women's participation levels outdistance that of men in the following areas:

- **100% more likely to be involved in discipleship** - women are twice as likely to be taking part in a discipleship process at a church - although just 1 out of 7 women are involved in such a program (14% to 7%);
- **57% more likely to participate in adult Sunday school** - 22% of women said that they have attended an adult Sunday school class in the past week (14% of men have attended such classes);
- **56% more likely to hold a leadership position at a church** - about 1 out of 7 women (14%) in the country said that they have served in a leadership capacity at a church, not including the role of pastor (9% of men have held such positions);
- **54% more likely to participate in a small group** - 1 out of every 5 women (20%) go to a small group that meets regularly for Bible study, prayer, or Christian fellowship (compared to 13% of men);
- **46% more likely to disciple others** - 1 out of every 5 women (19%) are currently serving as the spiritual mentor to someone else (compared to 13% of men);
- **39% more likely to have a devotional time or quiet time** - 61% of women said that, during the last seven days, they have intentionally spent time alone reading the Bible, reviewing devotional material, or praying (44% of men had done this);
- **33% more likely to volunteer for a church** - one-quarter of women (24%) said that during the last week they have volunteered some of their time to help a church (18% of men had done so);
- **29% more likely to read the Bible** - more than 2 out of every 5 women (45%) said that they have read the Bible during the past seven days (35% of men);
- **29% more likely to attend church** - slightly fewer than 1 out of every 2 women (45%) said that they attended a Christian church service during the last week (35% among men);
- **29% more likely to share faith with others** - more than one-quarter of women (27%) have shared their faith with someone else during the past 12 months, in the hope that the person would accept Christ as savior (21% among men);
- **23% more likely to donate to a church** - while a majority of women have donated to a church in the past 30 days (59%), it is slightly less than half of men (48%) who have given money to a church;
- **16% more likely to pray** - 89% of women have prayed to God in the past seven days (as did 77% of men).

The only religious activity in which men and women were equally likely to participate was meeting with a mentor or spiritual coach (19% of women and 19% of men were involved in such a relationship).

George Barna, president of the firm that conducted the research, commented about the role of men in the spiritual life of the family: "In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about men and women sharing household responsibilities more equally. Despite such an egalitarian vision, in most cases, roles are still often determined based upon gender - but that is especially true when it comes to the responsibility for the family's spiritual health and growth. Women, more often than not, take the lead role in the spiritual life of the family. Women typically emerge as the primary - or only - spiritual mentor and role model for family members. And that puts a tremendous burden on wives and mothers."

"If the Church is to stem the tide of biblical illiteracy and waning commitment to the Christian faith, men will have to reestablish themselves as partners and leaders of the spiritual functions of families. The family unit is the key for spiritual growth and maturation in our decentralized, relationally isolated culture. The apparent lack of spiritual leadership exhibited by millions of Christian men has significantly hampered the spiritual growth of tens of thousands of well-meaning but spiritually inert families."

True revival results in joyful obedience to God's Word

¹⁴And 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 seventh month, ¹⁵and 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."

During the lengthy day of Bible teaching led by Ezra, God in His providence led Ezra to cover the entirety of the Law of Moses, or first five books of the Old Testament (Neh. 8:1–2). Part of what was taught included the Feast of Booths (also sometimes referred to as the Feast of Tabernacles), which was very much like our celebration of Thanksgiving. It just so "happened" that their instruction occurred shortly before the time when the feast was to take place. The principal is that God chooses when we will be taught certain truths so that we can immediately apply them to our lives in obedience.

The spiritual leaders discovered instruction about the feast in Leviticus 23:37–43. This was celebrated from the 15th to the 22nd of the seventh month. Since they discovered these instructions on the second day of the seventh month (Neh. 8:2, 13), the timing was perfect. They had exactly two weeks to prepare for it. So they had the people get branches from various kinds of trees (Neh. 8:15) and build booths (temporary shelters) in various places. This recalled their days of wandering in the wilderness (Lev. 23:43).

True revival overthrows religion with Gospel

¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸And 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.

In Nehemiah 8:12, we read that “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.” Obedience followed because they had rightly understood the gospel of grace, which freed them to serve God out of delight rather than duty. After hearing the Law taught, they practiced James 1:22: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Having understood what was taught, the people eagerly sought to obey it immediately as it was the time of year for the Feast of Booths.

Apparently in previous years, not all the Jews had made booths and lived in them for the week of the feast. They had given only “token” acknowledgment of the feast. Furthermore, the joyful attitude of the people was beyond anything the nation had ever seen. It was truly a week of joyful celebration that brought glory to the Lord.

During the seven days of the feast, the Jews lived in booths made of branches, usually built on the flat roofs of their houses. It was a time for *looking back* and remembering the nation’s forty years of wandering in the wilderness, when the people were homeless and lived in temporary shelters. But the feast was also a time for *looking around* at the harvest blessings from the hand of God. The Lord had given them a good land, and they were never to forget the Giver as they enjoyed the gifts (Deut. 8). The Feast of Tabernacles was also an occasion for *looking ahead* to the glorious kingdom God promised His people, Israel (Zech. 14:4, 9, 16–20). It was a week-long festival of joyful praise and thanksgiving, focusing on the goodness of the Lord.^[1]

Furthermore, the Feast of Tabernacles was a time for sending food and gifts to others, especially to those who were needy. The Jews had found joy in *hearing* the Word of God, but now they found joy in *sharing* the blessings of God.^[2]

Many years later, Jesus Himself also celebrated this feast in John 7:10–26.

Ezra continued the “Bible conference” during the entire week of the feast, reading and explaining the Word of God day by day. The combination of joyful fellowship, feasting, and hearing the Word must have strengthened the people greatly. Then the week concluded with a solemn assembly (Num. 29:35).

Conclusion

The entirety of Nehemiah 8 stresses that the celebration of the Feast of Booths was to include solemn repentance of sin and corresponding joy in the grace of God. This is made possible through the gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ. This good news of Jesus was foreshadowed just weeks prior to the celebration of the Feast of Booths on the annual Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, which was the holiest day of the year prescribed in Leviticus 16. In God’s providence, Jerusalem was opened and the revival meeting occurred just in time for the celebration of the Day of Atonement.

^[1] Wiersbe, Warren W.: *Be Determined*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992, S. Ne 8:13

^[2] Ibid.

The Day of Atonement was the most important day of the year. It was intended to deal with the sin problem between humanity and God. Of the many prophetic elements on this special day, one stands out. On that day, two healthy goats without defect would be chosen; they were therefore fit to represent sinless perfection. The high priest would slaughter one goat, which acted as a substitute for the sinners who rightly deserved a violently bloody death for their many sins. The high priest treated the first goat as a sin offering. He slaughtered the innocent goat and sprinkled some of its blood on the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies. But the goat is no longer innocent when it takes the guilt of our sin because it is a sin offering for the people (Lev. 16:15). Subsequently, its blood represents life given as payment for sin. The result is that the dwelling place of God is cleansed of the defilement which resulted from all of the transgressions and sins of the people of Israel and God's wrath is satisfied.

The bloody slaughter of the goat on the Day of Atonement represents *propitiation*. Propitiation means that God's wrath, which is mentioned more than six hundred times in Scripture, was turned away, or propitiated, from sinners and diverted to Jesus Christ. This was made possible because Jesus substituted himself in our place as both our High Priest and the Lamb of God to pay the penalty for our sins (Hebrews; John 1:29). Many Scriptures speak of Jesus assuming God's wrath and thereby propitiating it from sinners. The English Standard Version of the Bible actually maintains the word "propitiation," unlike some other translations (Rom. 3:23–25; 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:9–10; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).

The high priest, acting as the representative and mediator between the sinful people and their holy God, would take the second goat and lay his hands on the animal while confessing the sins of the people. This goat, called the scapegoat, would then be sent away to run free into the wilderness away from the sinners, symbolically taking their sins with it. Theologically, we call this the doctrine of *expiation*, whereby our sin is expiated, or taken away so that we are made clean.

Throughout the Bible, some dozen words are frequently used to speak of sin in terms of staining our soul, defiling us, and causing us to be filthy or unclean. (For example, see Psalm 106:39; Proverbs 30:11–12; Mark 7:20.) The effect of sin, particularly sins committed against us, is that we feel dirty. I had one rape victim explain to me, for example, that after being raped she took a shower because she just felt dirty. What she was referring to was much deeper than just her body; somehow her soul had also been stained by the sin committed against her. The scapegoat illustrates for us how Jesus takes away our sin so that we can become new people who live new lives. Scripture uses a variety of verbs, such as "cleanse" and "purify" to explain this aspect of Jesus' work on the cross (Lev. 16:30; Jer. 33:8; Zech. 13:1; 1 John 1:7–9; Titus 2:14; Heb. 9:14). The Bible also frequently mentions that God's people wear white as a symbol that they have been cleansed from sin by Jesus (2 Chron. 5:12; Eccl. 9:8; Acts 1:10; Rev. 3:4–5; 6:11; 7:9–14; 15:6; 19:8).

Subsequently, only by rightly understanding that the entirety of Yom Kippur is fulfilled in Jesus do we appreciate Jesus as our High Priest who mediates between us and God the Father, our substitute who dies for our sins, and our scapegoat who takes away our sin so that we can live new lives of freedom and joy.

In closing, as God's people in Nehemiah 8 understood that Jesus was coming to atone for their sins as foreshadowed in Yom Kippur and His universal reign over all the earth in the Fest of Booths, they were freed from the drudgery of religion to the delight of the gospel:

Religion

If I obey God will love me
Good people & bad people
Birth family
What I do
Sanctification justifies me
Goal is to get from God
Sees hardship as punishment
About me
Appearing as a good person is key
Uncertainty of standing before God
Jesus as means
Ends in pride or despair

Gospel

Because God loves me I can obey
Repentant and unrepentant people
New birth
What Jesus has done
Justification enables sanctification
Goal is to get God
Sees hardship as sanctified affliction
About Jesus
Honest repentance is key
Certainty based upon Jesus' work
Jesus as end
Ends in humble joy

Next week: Nehemiah 9:1–21

For more free resources on Nehemiah, go to:

- o http://covenantseminary.inmotionhosting.com/OT230_Lecture_36.mp3 (for seminary lectures)
- o <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf> and <http://reformedperspectives.org/search.asp> (for study notes)
- o <http://www.ccel.org/wwwsb/Nehemiah/index.html> (for older commentaries and similar resources)

If you can only buy one commentary on Nehemiah, I recommend J. I. Packer's [*Passion for Faithfulness*](#).