

Wouldn't it be nice to have a revival? A good old-fashioned revival which sweeps through the Coulee Region. I remember when I was a college kid at my campus church, Calvary Lutheran Chapel in Madison, they talked of the good old days back when they had their old building, there would be a line out the door of students waiting for the first service to finish and get in for the second.

Wouldn't that be nice? To have that here at UWL or even just with the local populace of La Crosse? Wouldn't it be nice to have this place packed to the gills, even with two services!

As we look at the Old Testament text, we see Nehemiah. In the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, the people of Judah were getting back from exile. They had been in Babylon for seventy years, many of them had been born in Babylon or maybe a few of them were young when they left Jerusalem, but now they're finally returning to Jerusalem. And so we see for the first time in a long time, God's people are gathered. And we see something like a revival in our text.

What can we learn from Nehemiah chapter 8? What are three things? How do we get a revival? How does the Holy Spirit start a revival?

First, 3. The Holy Spirit starts a revival by calling and gathering the people. One of the first things we notice in Nehemiah 8 is that they're gathered. Men and women and those who have understanding, all of them are gathered to hear God's Word read to them by Ezra the priest.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but the way that have a revival, a resurgence in the church, is by having people. Believe it or not, there were distractions in those days too: there were buildings to rebuild, gardens to plant, business to conduct. There were all sorts of reasons not to be there that day at the Water Gate.

Yet when were they there? "**From early morning to midday.**" That's three to four hours! For a lot of us today, there are so many distractions: busyness Saturday night, some work to do Sunday morning, maybe just a lazy Sunday to stay inside, or out of town guests. There are many reasons why we might choose not to gather on Sunday. Nonetheless, the Lord promises "**For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.**" That's the first step, to be gathered together as God's people the Church.

Next, we see that they weren't gathered for town gossip or the latest Packer's score update. They were all there with Ezra the priest to hear God's Word. 2. The Holy Spirit starts a revival by enlightening us with His Word.

Today, if you wanted to gather a crowd to start a revival, you could get a fog machine; you could get a rock band. You could sell out tickets to Lambeau Field. You could get a popular celebrity, but if God's Word is not there, then it's no different than a rock concert. If you want a revival and God's Word is not there, then it's no different than a football game. If God's Word is not there then no lives

are changed, and it's no different than any other kind of mass gathering that we've seen in previous years.

What does verse 8 say? **“They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”** They translated the words; they explained the words. The sermon is important. The sermon changes lives. It's not as though you can take in God's Word by osmosis, like sleeping on a Bible. If I gave you the Hebrew or Greek Scriptures and just read it aloud to you in the original languages, it wouldn't help you at all. It's not going to do you any good. God has given us a church. God has given us pastors. God has given us lay leaders to help open scriptures to us to help explain what is going on. This is what is happening with Ezra as He explains Scriptures to the people.

So too, God demands and calls us not only to read Scriptures, but to apply it to our own lives. What does Scripture have to do with you? There are plenty of Bible scholars who know the Bible back and forth, left and right, but for them it is just information and facts in history with no bearing on how to live.

When we open scriptures, the most important part is who is Jesus and what has He done for you? All of Scripture explains who Jesus Christ is, and what He has done. As Ezra was preaching that day, he didn't know it, but he was preparing the hearts and minds of a people to receive their Savior Jesus who would be born in a manger, who would walk this Earth and do many miracles, who would ultimately die for your sins to forgive you, to give you new life. He would burst from the tomb to proclaim that death has no power over Him, no power over you.

As we gather here today to hear God's Word preached and taught, it's never about random facts and figures, it's about God changing your life through the man Jesus Christ who has come to save you.

That's how revival starts. Not by packing a stadium and having the church necessarily grow twice as big. Revival is not a matter of breadth necessarily. It isn't necessarily making the church bigger number-wise. Revival happens when the Holy Spirit takes hold of you and lets His Word have its way with you. Revival starts when God's Word grows deeper and deeper into our hearts.

This brings us to our last point: 1. The Holy Spirit starts a revival by sanctifying us with His joy. How did the crowds react to Ezra's preaching? We see here that they were weeping, crying, mourning.

Why might that be? Maybe we're worried that when we invite someone to church, first we're terrified that they're actually going to take us up on the offer, what if they actually come!? We're worried that maybe they're to feel uncomfortable. Maybe they'll be upset. They'll be upset with something pastor says. We think that they'll be sad, maybe even angry.

I remember the Onion, a satire newspaper with joke articles. The Onion had this headline, “Man Told He Had His Fly Down for the Past Thirty Years.” Again,

this is a joke, how can someone have something so obvious for such a long time. The article details all the experiences and milestones he went through and nobody told him.

That might be what's going on here in our text. You had to think that the people of Judah, many of whom grew up in exile. They grew up in Babylon, they didn't have a temple to go to. They didn't have an idea of what it meant to be a Hebrew. They didn't know all the kosher rules. They didn't know all the feasts and festivals to keep. When they heard God's Word for the first time, naturally there was mourning. There was sadness. All these years, God wanted this from me, and I didn't do it! All these years, I ate pork. All these years, I failed to observe the Passover. All these years, I failed God.

Maybe that's what we're worried about if we invite someone to church or we talk to one of our friends about Jesus. Maybe we're worried we're going to have that reaction. They're going to be angry saying, "You can't tell me how to live, of course I've done nothing wrong!" They might say they're sad, all these years, this is what God wanted of me and I can't do it!

As Christians, we have to take a page from Nehemiah. As God's Word of Law convicts, there could be a sadness in knowing that we've failed God and that we failed our neighbor. But what does Nehemiah say? Does he say, "You rotten sinners! Serves you right!" Yet that's what many worry will happen the first time they darken the door of a church.

No! He says, **"This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep... 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."**

And isn't that our hope as Christians? That as we gather together, even confessing our sins, even knowing that God knows all our failures, we also know that we have a Savior who has forgiven us of those sins and failures. We have a Savior who loves us, who died for us, and rose again for us. We can rejoice in that.

We can be joyful on this Sunday. The joy of the Lord is our strength. The joy of the Lord is our stronghold, our refuge, that when the sorrows of this world and the disappointments of this world are knocking at our door and wanting to overtake us, we have joy. Joy that God has rescued us. Joy that God has forgiven, and it is that news, that good news, the Holy Spirit takes and runs with. The Holy Spirit uses to change hearts and minds. You have heaven. That is the start of the revival: having that good news planted into your heart and change your life. **THE HOLY SPIRIT REVIVES US BY CALLING, GATHERING, ENLIGHTENING, AND SANCTIFYING HIS CHURCH THROUGH HIS WORD.**