

“Beating The Spiritual Blahs”

Nehemiah 7:73 - 8:18

Series: Nehemiah [#6]

Pastor Lyle L. Wahl

October 30, 2005

Theme: **Spiritual Vitality Springs From God’s Word.**

Introduction

This morning we return to our series in the book of Nehemiah. We have seen:

- Nehemiah’s vision to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to make it secure for the people who were returning;
- the challenges to the work, from outside and from within;
- and, of course, the work being completed in just 52 days.

It is easy to think, “That was a special, *super-spiritual* group!” It is easy to think this ... and wrong. Remember, the southern kingdom of Judah fell in 586 B.C. because the people turned away from God. While they were in exile many of them adopted much of the Persian culture around them. Even for the faithful returning to their land, knowledge of God and His word was in short supply. In spite of rallying to complete the great project, most of the people’s spiritual lives were flat, dry, dull.

The people were experiencing *the spiritual blahs.*” We know about that, don’t we! The feelings of:

- being dry, bland, dull spiritually;
- of not having spiritual excitement and joy;
- times when it seems that God is distant, impersonal;
- or, when your “spiritual go has got up and went”;
- times when we don’t seem to see God working;
- times when we lack a sense of purpose, fulfillment, or the warmth of closeness with God;

The Spiritual Blahs.

We have a good, positive lesson for those times, and for preventing those times in the verses before us. The people under Nehemiah beat the spiritual blahs. Chapter 8 is sometimes called the first recorded revival. *Revival* refers to a reawakening, a renewal of vitality. Now there are many different descriptions of spiritual revival (e.g., awakening, renewal, moving of God, being refreshed, power ... etc.). There is also uncertainty and confusion about what revival is and is not.

The basic Biblical description of revival is spiritual awakening, renewal, vitality from God in those who are saved. From the people and the record before us we learn how to beat the spiritual blahs. Central to all true spiritual revivals is *God's Word*. It is the foundation. Key truth today: *spiritual vitality springs from God's Word*. So you need to...

Check Your Attitude Toward God's Word.

There are three tests here to check our attitude. First is the test of interest. We need to place this in its setting. At 7:73, we find the work completed and everyone has returned to their homes. Six days later,

“And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.” (8:1)

This was on the east side of the city. The people came *voluntarily* and they asked Ezra to dig out the Word of God and teach them—it was a *preacher's dream!* They had an *interest* in God's Word that took them beyond wishing and talking to doing something.

Test #1 of our attitude toward God's Word is our interest. Do you have a desire to open, read and think through God's Word— a true and positive desire, not the “I ought to, I have to” guilt-drenched thinking? Do you have a desire to learn and live God's Word?

Test #2 is the test of reverence. Drop down to verse 5.

“Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.”

They displayed their respect, their reverence for God's Word. They stood up when it was brought out and they saw it. This is the basis for a tradition which is sometimes followed today by both Jews and Christians. It is not a mandatory tradition, but can be a statement of reverence. They did this to show their reverence for God's Word.

We may know some of what God tells us about the Bible. Think about just one of many descriptions,

“The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.” (Psalm 19:7-10)

We *know* these things. But do we have respect and reverence for God's inerrant Word which is all of these things and more? Or, do we take it for granted? Do we actually show *disrespect* by not reading it, not following its truth?

The third test is the test of work. “What do you mean?” We see it in the people at the Water Gate in verse 3,

“He [Ezra] read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.”

Now go down to the middle of verse 7 where it tells us,

“the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.”
(7b-8)

Talk about long services! 3, 4, 5 hours. Ezra and 13 other preachers mounted this first recorded podium and read, translated, preached, explained God’s Word. And for all that time “all the people were attentive” (3).

There’s even more. Look at verse 13,

“Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.”

And verse 18,

“He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.”

An all-day Bible conference that went on for a week. there were no sight seeing side trips; no Eskimoes or Oilers games thrown in to get the people’s attention, or give a break. This was *work!* These people invested time, energy, concentration.

Our real attitude toward God’s Word is determined in part by our *work ethic*—how much time, energy, concentration do we invest into knowing God’s Word? We all can use some help here. And so, here at Knox, along with other things, we promote the Scripture Union material, which helps guide reading and thinking about the Bible. And remember, today is the last day to order for 2006.

Beating The Spiritual Blahs” begins with testing our attitude toward God’s Word: checking out our interest, reverence, and work. Next you move on to ...

Allow God’s Word To Work In You.

Several responses of the people gathered for this Bible conference, or revival meeting underscore important truths for us. The first is that they were open to the truth. On the first day they heard God’s Word. Their response? Verse 9 tells us “all the people were weeping.”

Nehemiah, Ezra and the other leaders told them, “Do not be grieved (10). The Levites “calmed” them (11).

What was going on in the people at this point? They heard God’s truth and were *open* to it. They saw the holiness of God and His directions for them. They also realized their failings, their sinfulness, and were saddened by them, they cried openly over them.

To allow the Holy Spirit to accomplish God’s work in us, we need to be open to the truth of God’s Word. When we come to God’s Word we need to be *open* to whatever God has to say to us about Himself, ourselves, His truth and His ways for us. That includes instruction and inspiration. It also includes conviction and challenge.

Next we see the people being open to God’s priorities. At that great Bible conference God’s truth touched the people. Note the leader’s response,

“‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, ‘Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.’ All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.” (9b-12)

What’s going on? It was not that Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites could not stand to see grown people crying. 8:2 gives us the date, the beginning of the 7th month. 8:14 gives us the significance,

“They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.”

So, yes, hear and respond to the truth of God. Recognize your sin, express sorrow and repent/turn from it. But once expressed, don’t get stuck there. And for them at that specific time, move on to God’s priority for those days— which was to celebrate God’s bringing them out of slavery in Egypt!

Now, the people had not done this for a long time, and it may have sounded strange at first ... “go out and gather branches, make simple booths and live in them for this time.” But, as we see in 8:15-18, they did it anyway, and they did it gladly! They followed God’s priorities.

Be open to God’s priorities. Do we know what God’s priorities are for us? Some are universal, and some are personal. Universal priorities are those which are for all believers at all times. We know what they are by reading the Bible. They include giving God His rightful authority over us; loving others with God’s love; growing in Christlikeness; serving

and witnessing. Then there are our choices which the Bible does not specifically address. These are the personal priorities. We know these through prayer and counsel guided by general principles from the Bible. They include what kind of work or profession to pursue; to marry or be single; to know the right balance of all the options and responsibilities facing us. We need to know and be open to God's priorities.

Spiritual vitality springs from God's Word. So check your attitude toward God's Word and allow God's Word to work in you. We still may feel and ask...

So ... Where's The Vitality?

The turning point is obeying God's Word. The people in Jerusalem demonstrate this for us. The vitality, the freshness came not as they mourned and wailed over their sin, but as they *obeyed* God. Do not misunderstand me. We *need* to face our sin as the Holy Spirit convicts us of it. True sorrow over sin is important to repentance (turning from it). But the people did not prolong their mourning and wailing, even though they felt like doing so. More important than that was to obey God. God had set that time apart for them as a nation to celebrate. They obeyed God, His Word.

“All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them ... 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. The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.” (8:12, 16-18)

When we *feel* spiritually dry, when we *are* spiritually dry, facing any sin in our lives is important. But we also need to move on. Not to wallow in misery. Not to just wish and long for freshness. But to act, to *obey* what we know God expects of us. This is a foundational principle for vital Christian living. On the one hand, to consider and boldly act in obedience. On the other, to dismiss the dead-end deceptions of Satan's forces that keep some longing and searching for a special experience or insight to lift them up to something better.

This same principle applies to people who know about Jesus and His gift of salvation, but who have not yet received it. They know the truth, feel sorry about and miserable for their failures and sin; they long for something far better; *but not* until they boldly act in faith to make the decision and receive God's gift will they be released from their misery.

Let's go back to revival. Some years ago a family in the church we served left their career and home to go to Bible School. During their time at that school there were some things and experiences taking place that many people labelled "Revival." He raised the question to me, "Is this really revival? What is revival?" One thing is certain: true revival is not judged by how many tears are shed, how many confessions and promises are made, how many special experiences are logged, but by how much God's people obey God and His Word. To turn the corner on spiritual dryness, on the spiritual blahs, requires that we hear, receive and obey God as He speaks to us in His Word.

It is then that we can have God's joy which energizes our lives. "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. How does this fit? How does this work? Strength and vitality come from the "joy of the LORD." How did the people at that time receive God's joy? They had been in a week-long Bible conference, or revival meeting. They were not just "in" a meeting. They carefully heard, genuinely accepted, and boldly obeyed God's Word. Obedience releases God's joy which energize us. That is why they were joyful—God's love, grace and mercy was more than sufficient to deal with their sin, to lift them up, to give them fulfilled, meaningful lives. As they responded, God released His joy to energize them.

How does this fit for us? Recall just two statements from the Bible that apply here:

- Jeremiah 15:16, [writing in a very difficult time] "Your *words* were found and I ate them, and Your *words* became for me a *joy* and the delight of my heart..."
- Jesus, John 15:11, "These things I have *spoken* to you so that *My joy* may be in you, and that *your joy* may be made full."

God gives us His *truth* in the Bible. God uses His Word to enlighten, convict and convince, instruct, *and* to give joy that energizes our lives as we obey Him. God's joy that gives assurance to overcome questions and doubts about "can / has God really accepted me?" God's joy to lead us out of the dry, parched places into fresh fellowship and service.

I know, for some, it seems too basic. Some Christians are looking for something to give freshness and vitality, although they are not sure exactly what it is. All the while they overlook what God has already provided. 15 years ago an elderly couple in Wisconsin had a visitor who took an interest in a still-life painting they had. The couple considered it a "nice painting", but hadn't thought about it beyond that. The painting was evaluated; then verified to be a Van Gogh, estimated to be worth \$500,000 at that time. They didn't recognize the incredible financial worth of that "nice" painting, just as we may not recognize the incredible spiritual worth of God's Word.

Conclusion.

Yes, spiritual vitality springs from God's Word. God does not want you, me—He does not want any of His children to spend their lives in a spiritual wasteland. He offers His love, His joy, His strength and vitality as the Holy Spirit applies the truth of the Bible to our hearts. Our part is to read, think, receive and obey.

In your time of personal reflection and response now,

- Thank God for the wonderful gift of His Word, the Bible. He has spoken to us—with certainty, with the *words of life*.
- Thank Him for His joy and the strength it releases.
- Consider and then commit yourself to a pattern of ongoing *revival*, of ongoing reading, thinking, living, obeying God's Word.

© 2005 Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.