



FEASTING FOR ALL NATIONS

Nehemiah 8-9

Dan Claire

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Many of us have watched the unfolding tragedy in the Philippines this week after a super-typhoon left more than 10,000 dead there. We've seen their government fail to mount an adequate emergency response and relief agencies trying to work with them or around them. What a complicated and difficult dance it must be, with so many different groups and interests involved. How do you organize such a massive operation? Where do you even begin?

When the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity, their situation in Jerusalem was similar. Nothing was left of their once magnificent capital city except rubble and tumbleweeds. Not only was there physical destruction, but also their entire way of life had been lost. After decades of living in captivity, their various customs, their religious practices, and even their language prior to the exile was largely forgotten. As the exiles returned to rebuild Jerusalem, they faced similar challenges: Where to begin? What to prioritize first? And who's in charge?

We live in one of the most beautiful and sophisticated cities in the world. Yet in many respects, Washington's glory is superficial; behind the grand façade there's so much corruption and decay, both within our institutions, and also within us. We Washingtonians are a beautiful lot. But peel off our skin and—apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus—inside we're bruised and rotten. Our city and our hearts are in desperate need of renewal.

That's the driving vision of the Church of the Resurrection: *we seek God's renewal of ourselves, our city and our world.* We long for the day when our city is no longer known for its corruption, greed, hatred and poverty, and instead is known as the city where Jesus reigns.

In this lesson we'll learn God's priorities for renewal after the Babylonian exile as recorded in Nehemiah 8-9. As we do, we'll consider how the Lord would have us tackle this grand vision for renewal.

FIRST, READ! (Neh 8:1-8)

If this period of Old Testament history feels unfamiliar, there's good reason for it. Unlike some of the better-known stories from the Bible, the historical record of the return from exile is pretty sparse. It was a time of absolute chaos, picking up the pieces after catastrophic destruction. We shouldn't be surprised that very little of that story was preserved by biblical historians.

Here's what we do know: Decades passed for the Jews exiled in Babylon. In 539 BC, their captors themselves were conquered by the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great. Cyrus then sent some Jewish pioneers to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and reinstitute worship of the Hebrew God. It took many years for them to complete their work.

About 75 years later, another Persian emperor by the name of Artaxerxes sent a second wave of Jewish exiles back home. At the time Jerusalem was still a wasteland, due in large measure to its insecure borders. Nehemiah, the Jewish governor under Artaxerxes, led the people in a round-the-clock push to rebuild the city wall. Security was their top priority. In spite of enormous opposition, they finally finished the wall.

In terms of disaster relief, the completion of the Jerusalem wall marked the end of their urgent response effort. Once the city was secure, they were able to pivot and begin a more orderly, structured approach to their restoration efforts. That's where our lesson begins:

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. *Nehemiah 8:1-3.*

In this way, many of the survivors heard the Bible read to them for the very first time! Ezra read for hours and hours, and (v3) "the ears of all the people were attentive." Of course they were attentive, because Ezra wasn't reading just any old story. He was reading *their* story, their family history, from (v1) "the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel," i.e. Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy they heard God's message to their ancestors prior to taking possession of the Promised Land. It was like the warnings your father may have given you before he allowed you drive his car solo for the first time. Deuteronomy was filled with hope and promise, but also solemn warnings of what would happen if they made a wreck of things. Thus, the people listened intently, hearing God's side of their story for the first time.

As we continue to read through Neh 8:1-8, note the emphasis on reading *with understanding*, a word that is repeated four times in the passage (v. 2, 3, 7, 8). In v7, various leaders moved out through the people and worked with them to make sure they got the message. In summary:

They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. *Nehemiah 8:8.*

Again, as soon as the walls were intact and the gates locked, reading God's Word was the first thing they did. Why? Because that's the proper starting place for any renewal effort. God's Word is the unsurpassed and definitive guide to renewal. Before we do anything else to renew ourselves, our city, and our world, we should consult the Creator and Architect of all things. We must understand and follow God's intent and design if our renewal efforts are to succeed.

Sadly, it's not my first inclination to do so. My preferred approach might be described as "shoot first, ask (God) questions later." Not surprisingly the results of this approach are highly varied. Often times what I "fix" requires further renewal soon thereafter. But when I seek the Lord first, my renewal efforts are more likely to bear fruit.

For this reason, our church spends a lot of time together with our noses in the Bible. If our *raison d'être* is renewal, we can't afford not to read. For example, last summer we spent nine weeks carefully working through what God's Word says about sex and relationships. We did so because our city is desperately in need of renewal in this area, and as ambassadors of God's renewal, we need to know God's design and intent regarding sex and relationships.

This is also why we're a liturgical church. We don't use liturgy because it's high-brow, as people sometimes think. Rather, we use liturgy because it's one of the most effective ways to hide God's Word in our hearts. From start to finish, almost every prayer and response in our services is taken straight out of the Bible. Hopefully one of the greatest strengths of our church is that our worship is saturated with God's Word.

First we read, because God's Word is the proper starting point for renewal....

SECOND, REJOICE! (Neh 8:9-12)

"All the people wept as they heard the words of the Law." *Nehemiah 8:9b*.

Of course they wept! The reading described God's love for their ancestors, his desire for their faithfulness, and his assurance of exile if they chose apostasy instead. In other words, what God promised almost 1000 years earlier in Deuteronomy was exactly what happened in the Babylonian exile. It was like standing beside your father's wrecked car and remembering what he said would happen if you drove it too fast.

Then something remarkable happened:

"Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." *Nehemiah 8:9a*.

They made no effort to downplay what had happened. They didn't say, "Cheer up, it's all cosmetic damage and we can fix it." Rather, they called the people to rejoice because "the day is holy unto the Lord." This was the same language used on the seventh day of creation when God finished his work, blessed the day and declared it holy.¹ In making the same declaration in Jerusalem, Ezra and Nehemiah were resetting the city's clock. They were re-establishing the Sabbath, the most basic feast of Judaism, a day of rest to celebrate what *God* had done for them.

¹ Genesis 2:1-3.

Oh how we need to hide this particular word in our hearts! We have so much to celebrate, and yet I fear that we do a much better job with Lent than we do of feasting. Are you someone who fears birthdays and holidays, because they're another reminder of what hasn't happened or what you haven't experienced with the passing of time? I'm ashamed to confess that I was pretty blue when I turned forty several years ago. I was myopic and self-pitying, contemplating areas of mediocrity and incompleteness in my own life. But then friends in the church surrounded me with love in a huge party/worship service that celebrated not what *I* had done, but what *God* had done in our midst. It was the best gift I could have been given: a kind and gentle rebuke, reminding me of God's amazing grace.

Back in Jerusalem, if it had been a day to remember their own achievements then of course the survivors should have wept. What they had to show for their efforts was the catastrophic destruction of their city. But that wasn't what God wanted. He wanted them to rejoice in him.

And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. *Nehemiah 8:10b*.

"Don't be sad! The time for grieving has passed." The Lord had rescued them and given them a ministry of renewal in Jerusalem. In the same way he has saved us and given us a ministry of renewal here in Washington. It's time to rejoice in him!

They were given specific instructions regarding how they were to rejoice. Take note of how they were to keep the Sabbath:

"Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord." *Nehemiah 8:10a*.

It's difficult to remain sad when you're eating, drinking, and sharing with your neighbors. Feasting like this each week on the Sabbath was a physical demonstration of faith in God, trusting that his work was sufficient to provide more than enough for their needs.

Feasting isn't unspiritual. Rather, it's a tool for discipleship. It's a tangible reminder that we aren't the center of the universe, and that's quite alright. This is God's story, and we're greatly privileged to be part of it. Feasting reminds us of God's loving and providential care for us, even when we stumble and fall. Feasting helps us remember the plausibility of following the Lord by faith and not by sight.²

First we read, because God's Word is the proper starting point for renewal. Then we rejoice in what God has done....

THEN REFRESH, REAFFIRM & REENGAGE (Neh 8:13-18; 9:1-38)

Reading and rejoicing aren't our ultimate goals, however. We read God's Word and feast together so that we can reengage in the mission of renewal.

² 2 Corinthians 5:7.

You may have already figured out that this pattern of reading and rejoicing is the same pattern we follow in our Sunday worship. As with the Sabbath feast, Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper as a way of celebrating what he has done. Each week, we read God's Word and rejoice at the Lord's Table, so that we might reengage in the mission of renewal.

Jesus hinted at this mission when he inaugurated the Lord's Supper, offering the cup as "the new covenant in my blood, which is shed *for many*" (Mt 26:28). It's as if he was saying, "Remember your vocation as a Kingdom of Priests for all nations. You eat and drink with me now, so that the whole world may yet come to my table." Therefore go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Back in Jerusalem, after their great Sabbath rest of reading and rejoicing, it was time to get back to work. So Ezra started a leadership Bible study for the heads of all the various clans.

On 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. *Nehemiah 8:13*.

All the key leaders got together to study what they had heard the day before.

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. *Nehemiah 8:14*.

In their Bible study, they discovered that the Feast of Booths, the last of the seven annual feasts, would soon be upon them. This feast came at the end of the fall harvest, when all the work was done, and they had no more room in their barns to store God's bounty. These great feasts served as a reminder of God's plan for his people. Among them was Passover in the spring, to remember their *salvation* from slavery in Egypt. There was Pentecost in the early summer, to remember the call to *faithfulness* at Mt Sinai. And finally there was the Feast of Booths in the fall, calling them to be *fruitful*, for the sake of all the nations.

Of all the feasts, the Feast of Booths was the most spectacular. When the fall harvest was complete, they held a massive seven-day campout in thatched huts with all their friends and relations. Each night, they visited one another's huts and enjoyed a sweet time of fellowship together, resting and remembering God's blessings. (When you're camping out, it's easier to remember the blessing of the house and the bed God has given you.) Each day there was a huge worship service, featuring the reading of God's Word, and then an almost endless number of sacrifices, though the number and kind of sacrifices each day was always a multiple of seven. And of course, with all the sacrifices, there was a constant provision of roasted meats to share with one another.

Why did they go to so much trouble to put on such a great feast? They did it to *refresh* their vision and *reaffirm* their vocations, so that they might *reengage* in the work of renewal.

How did the Feast of Booths *refresh* their vision? All the "sevens" associated with the Feast of Booths serve this purpose. They are a reminder of God's vision for his world. Ever since God rested on the seventh day of Creation, the number seven has been special among God's people.

In the Bible, seven is always a sign of abundance and completion. The Feast of Booths was a seven day campout in the seventh month of the year. It featured seven days of reading God's Word, and seven nights of feasting (on sacrifices numbering in the high multiples of seven) with the Lord and his people, as a symbol of the eternal rest that will come when the mission to all nations is completed. In this way, the Feast of Booths was spectacular way of *refreshing* their vision of the Kingdom of God.

How did the Feast of Booths *reaffirm* their vocations? We need to observe that there was more to the feast than seven days of reading and rejoicing. All the experiences of the week, particularly the study of God's Word, led to a moment of decision to pledge allegiance to the Lord. In Nehemiah 9, at the end of the feast, the people responded to the Lord with a lengthy, heartfelt confession. In a sense, after hearing God's word for seven days straight, they were finally competent to confess with understanding. In the prayer in Nehemiah 9, they narrated how they had sinned against the Lord, how the Lord had responded, and they repeatedly affirmed that God's actions throughout were righteous. Then, at the very end of the prayer, they committed themselves to a new covenant of faithfulness and fruitfulness unto God.

We are so privileged to have time off each year to take vacations, but sadly we often don't make very good use of them. Having worked and worked and worked to the point of exhaustion, then we break free from Washington for a week of R&R. And whether we fill it with extreme adventures, or sleeping on a beach towel in the sun, the goal is the same: escape. After all, it's *my* vacation, and I'm entitled to do with it what I please!

Sadly, even though these weeks may be restful at the time, they don't last. For many there's precious little residual effect after a few days back in the office.

We ought to take a different view of our holidays. Instead of regarding them as "*my* vacation to do with as I please," we should see them as gifts that God calls us to steward wisely. My very best times away have been those rare occasions when I've regarded my time in this way. On such occasions, I've been renewed in the Lord, particularly through his Word, and in the end come to reaffirm my vocation.³

Think about it. What if we talked about this together in our RezGroups prior to scattering for Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or summer vacation? What if we helped one another do more than merely escape? What if spiritual renewal and reaffirmation of our vocation somehow became a goal of every holiday? What a difference it would make whenever we came back to work. Think of the momentum we would have as a mission of renewal to the city. That's how the Feast of Booths was supposed to work among those who practiced it.

Finally, we want to *reengage* in the ministry of renewal. By the grace of God, we've experienced forgiveness through the cross of Christ, and we presently enjoy the renewal that all the rest of creation is groaning for. Consequently we are ambassadors of God's renewal; we want to see it spread throughout our city and the world.

³ Or change my vocation, as I did long ago, when Elise and I set aside a day to read and pray together, and we came back with a new direction from God.

In Neh 9, just before the people made a new covenant with the Lord, they cried out to him in agony about the backwardness of their situation:

Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress. *Nehemiah 9:36-37*.

Throughout their prayer all the way up until this point, they had affirmed that the desolation of Jerusalem was all their own fault. Finally, at the end of the prayer, they returned to *God's* design. The nations of the world were feasting, but not at all as God had intended. Instead of being God's faithful stewards, they had become the slaves of foreign kings. Instead of welcoming the nations to the Lord's table, their harvest was being exported throughout the Persian Empire, to be laid on the tables of other gods. They were indeed blessing the nations, but not as God had intended. So they cried out to the Lord for renewal within themselves, so that they might become agents of renewal for their city and world.

Those of us who have decided to follow the Lord Jesus Christ have been given the precious gift of his Spirit. Apart from him, we can do nothing. But in the power of the Spirit, we can indeed see his God's Kingdom come and his will be done in Washington as it is in heaven. So let us reaffirm our commitment to this work, and then let's come to the Lord's table and feast with him. We do so not only for ourselves, but also for the sake of the many, in anticipation of the day when he makes all things new and all the nations are welcomed to his table.