

“A Joy or a Drag?”

Nehemiah 8:1-18

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Perhaps the best known sermon in American history is Jonathan Edwards' sermon titled, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. He preached the sermon in 1741, at the height of the revival period known as the First Great Awakening and many people consider it to be a classic example of fire and brimstone preaching. But Jonathan Edwards was not what you would think of as a fire and brimstone preacher. In fact, he was just the opposite. While the sermon, and many of his other sermons, was a warning about hell, Jonathan Edwards would actually be considered rather dull today. He didn't get excited. He didn't pound the pulpit or yell. In fact, he didn't even look at his congregation. He would read from his manuscript. His preaching was described as "solemn, with a distinct and careful enunciation, and a slow cadence."

But God used Jonathan Edwards in an amazing way. Beginning in 1731, members of Edwards' congregation began to be visibly moved during his sermons. They would begin to weep. Later they would get more animated and eventually it was downright charismatic. By the spring of 1734 a revival had broken out in his town of Northampton, Massachusetts and 300 of the 1100 youth in the town had been admitted to the church. And then this revival spread to other towns in the region and the news spread all over the colonies and even to England and Scotland.

It's important to remember that the Great Awakening wasn't some planned program of his church. It wasn't like a Billy Graham Crusade. It just happened in these little Puritan churches in the sleepy little towns of New England. The Great Awakening was the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts and minds of the people.

God had done it before. Nehemiah chapter 8 describes a similar situation in ancient Jerusalem. After more than 70 years of exile, some of God's people had returned to

Jerusalem and under Nehemiah's leadership had rebuilt the walls around the city in the face of incredible opposition and in only 52 days.

Nehemiah had repeatedly told the people that God would make it happen. All they had to do was trust God and do their part. Along the way they didn't really believe him. They complained. They were afraid and tired. Did I mention they complained? But the wall was finished in record time and everybody, including their enemies, knew that it was because of God.

Well whenever you experience God working like that in your life, one of the results is that you want to experience more of it. When God answers your prayers it makes you want to pray more. It did the same thing for the Jews. They wanted more of God in their lives so they gathered together in the square near the Water Gate for worship. And a big part of that worship was Ezra the priest reading from the Torah. They had heard the Scriptures read before, probably many times, but this time the words seemed different. They seemed to come alive. Verse 3 says, "the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law." And when he opened the scroll, the people all stood up!

When we read this chapter we might get the impression that this was kind of a spontaneous gathering. It can sound like they just all showed up and started demanding that Ezra go get the Bible and read to them. But it seems obvious that this was a planned event. They had built a large wooden platform and a high pulpit for the occasion. Most likely this was the work of Nehemiah as well. He wasn't just interested in rebuilding the wall, Nehemiah was interested in rebuilding his country, and that would take returning to God. In Zechariah 1:3 God promises, "return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you." Just as the wall could not be rebuilt without God, the people cannot be rebuilt without Him, either. The

same goes for us. If we want to see renewal and revival in our church and in our community we need to have a hunger for God's word and a dependence on God working to make it happen. We need to attempt things that only God can accomplish.

This chapter is a turning point in the book of Nehemiah. To accomplish his goal of spiritual renewal, Nehemiah recognizes that he needs to begin to recede into the background and let others lead who are skilled in reading and interpreting the Scriptures, people like Ezra. From this point on in the book, Nehemiah's name is only mentioned a few times. Nehemiah demonstrates humble, servant leadership.

When the people gathered, Ezra preached from the Law, perhaps as long as 6 hours. This was not as simple as reading the Scriptures. They were written in Hebrew but after 70 years the people spoke the language of the country where they were in exile, Aramaic. So they had to translate for them and explain what they meant, so the people could understand. It was an all-day Bible study and the people didn't want to stop. They had a hunger for God's Word. We should, too.

As they heard the Word of God, perhaps really hearing it for the first time in their lives, they were convicted of their sin. They began to understand the holiness of God and the ways they had violated his laws. Verse 9 says, "For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law." The same thing was happening when Jonathan Edwards preached. People felt convicted and would weep or even moan loudly.

When Nehemiah and Ezra and the other Levite priests saw the reaction of the people they said, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." Instead, they were to go and have a party. They were to celebrate. Because just as God had worked to help build the wall, it was obvious that God was working in their hearts, and that's worth celebrating. Verse 12 says, "all the people when 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.*" Jesus said, "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The same goes for us. It's easy to get into a routine, to think we know the Bible. Maybe we don't pay as close attention when the Scripture is read. Maybe we think we know it all already. Maybe we think the Bible is about a list of rules we have to follow, rules meant to limit our enjoyment. Nothing could be further from the truth. Maybe you think following Jesus is kind of a drag.

But the truth is that it should be a joy, not a drag. When we come together to worship, to hear the Bible read and explained, it should excite us. These are the Words of God. The creator of the universe is speaking to *you!* We should be on the edge of our seat. In fact, you can even stand up if you feel moved. If you don't feel that way about the Bible this is a good time to ask yourself why not. Have you ever felt that way about it? By reading and understanding the Bible we are actually spending time in God's presence.

Finally, chapter 8 ends with the Jews celebrating the Feast of Booths for the first time in many years. When they discovered in the Scripture what God wanted them to do they did it joyfully. We should, too. As you learn what God wants you to do, like making disciples of Jesus, or giving generously, or serving other people, you should be excited to do it. Because doing God's will is a reason for a celebration.

Amen.