

We are all looking for spiritual revival to some extent. The latter chapters of Nehemiah show how a right understanding of history is a vital component in spiritual revival. God's has brought home his exiled people again. The city walls have been rebuilt. Festivals have been restored according to the scriptural pattern. Now God's people need spiritual depth in their relationship with him and one another.

1 **HALF A DAY AT CHURCH** [9:1 - 5]

[i] Israelites Gathered [9:1]

As is the basic idea in fellowship of any kind the Israelites gathered. It was the 24th day of the 7th month in the Jewish calendar; that is two days after a week of festival. What is unusual is the practise of fasting after feasting [8:10]. Normally things are the other way round. Our Moslem friends fast in the day and feast at night during Ramadan and then conclude the month of fasting with a great feast. Buddhists have completed three months of fasting during a period called lent by joining together in a joyful feast. The reverse process practised by God's people in Fifth Century BC might be a good one for us to follow after the Christmas / New Year festivities. Not dieting to remove the excess, but fasting and prayer to reclaim the relationship with God. The sackcloth and ashes worn symbolised repentance and the desire for a new relationship with God. They were not models on the catwalk, but penitents mourning over the sin which spoiled their fellowship with the Lord. Holiness under the Old Covenant was an earth and physical thing displayed in dress and demeanour as well as in belief and behaviour.

[ii] Israelites Segregated [9:2]

Being "separated from foreigners" was not a racial matter, but a religious one [Leviticus 20:26]. They were returning to the standards of the covenant imposed on them by God to show they were a people who acknowledged him as Lord. They were not indifferent to their neighbours and their needs. They demonstrated their different belief and behaviour.

[iii] Israelites Worshipped [9:3]

We hear many things about worship these days; much of it never rising above sentiment and personal preference with little submission to God resulting. The experiences among Old Testament believers in Nehemiah's day have much to teach us as people of faith living under the New Testament. The Law of God was read for three hours. [9:3, 8:3] This led to "confession of their sins and the sins of their fathers", recognising that sin is never an isolated experience confined to one individual. Our sin hurts all with whom we are in contact. Three hours of confession ["a quarter of the day"] included worship in song. Two choirs each of eight levites [with five people in both; that is, eleven separate singers in all] led in praise. The call was clear for the elect of God to "stand up and bless [praise] the Lord." [9:4-5]; a theme still evident in James Montgomery's Christian hymn, 'Stand up and bless the Lord you people of his choice'. The splendour of God's majesty anointed the starkness of their renewed conviction with a timeless radiance. Dull sackcloth and ashes and haggard faces [from fasting] were offset by the sparkle of praise: inadequate but sincere. "Let them bless your glorious name which is exalted above all blessing and praise." [9:5b] Western Christians could learn much from revived Eastern churches in their new found freedom to worship. When ministering in Ukraine the first time, I was stunned to be the third preacher at a Service which went on for many hours. It was a joyous and uplifting experience. Given the right elements true and acceptable worship need not be limited to the tightly regimented short slots dictated by the instant generation. Half a day at church could be a great experience given the fundamentals set out in
Nehemiah's
account.

2 **HOW GREAT GOD IS** [9:6 - 37]

Scripture set the tone and the pattern for worship on this occasion, as it should among the people of God anytime.

[i] Creator [9:6]

Fundamental to a Bible based faith is the fact that God created the world and everything in it. The move away to theories of men has left the church in desperate confusion, not to mention gross immorality in many places. Spiritual revival and any prospect of healing rest on the confession of faith made here. There can be no forgiveness and restoration, no healing and encouragement otherwise. "You made all and preserve [give life to] everything".

[ii] Saviour

It is precisely because he is the Creator and Sustainer of all things that God can be the Saviour of those who look to him in faith for forgiveness and healing. He is the God who chose, and brought out from the bondage of moon worship the man whom he renamed Abraham; the father of all the faithful under both covenants. [Nehemiah 9:7-8; Romans 4:16] Under Moses, God saved his people from exile in an earlier generation [9:9-12]. As a saved people, He gave them a pattern for living, [9:13-14] and sustained them in their wilderness days [9:15, 19-21]; providing forgiveness to restore their relationship with him. [9:16-18] Nehemiah's people praised God as they rejoiced in his nature, " a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love". [9:17] Reminders of the promised Land given to their ancestors provided a reality check in their own circumstances. It was disobedience and rebellion that caused God "to hand over [his people] to their enemies." [9:27] They experienced love's discipline in this rejection, and "when they cried God gave them deliverance". In every age followers of the living God must admit, "you abandoned and you delivered"! They can be reassured that love's direction will bring them home safely; restored to the Father's presence. "In all that has happened you have been just." [9:33]

3 HOLINESS IS THE WAY [9:38-10:39]

Healing and hope depend on entering into "a binding agreement" [9:38] to obey the will of God who is our Creator and Saviour. Here they were literally "cutting a promise"; chipped in stone perhaps, or written in blood? The privilege of belonging brings onerous responsibilities.

[i] Civil authorities Nehemiah and Zedekiah signed the agreement [10:1], followed by the other leaders representing all the nation in the process of renewing covenant obligations. [10:2-27] They were not changing, but confirming old truths. Desire for the new is ever the symptom of sinful man adrift from God. [Acts 17:19-21] God's revival of Jerusalem in these days of Nehemiah produced a purified remnant: "all who have separated themselves." [10:28]

[ii] It was reaffirmed that marriage of the faithful with foreigners was forbidden. [10:30] Again this was on religious and practical grounds, not racial prejudice. [Exodus 34:12-16] Under the New Covenant, Christians are called upon to avoid binding relationships which might impinge upon their ability to serve the Lord. [2 Corinthians 6:14 - 7:1]

[iii] The peculiar practice of keeping one day in seven for renewing their relationship with the Lord was underlined. Foreign traders tempted believers to foreign ways then as they do now. Middle aged Christians can remember the blessedness of this principle applied to Sunday and called the Lord's Day; now virtually abandoned throughout the organised church in the West. It is hard for people to grasp the benefits of living for God, when their Christian neighbours live as they do; fearful and addicted. Our Christian profession of faith needs to be supported by a grateful, dignified demeanour.

[iv] Under the earthy provisions of the Old Covenant where a physical structure like the Temple symbolised God's presence with his people "taxes and offering must be paid." [10:32-39] God's people under the New Covenant are not bound to him by Law, but by grace, so they enjoy to give more than the law requires to maintain Gospel witness. Participation in such generosity is a foretaste of the glorious liberty of the children of God. [Romans 8:21]

4 HISTORY IS IMPORTANT [11:1 - 12:26]

Not the stuff of a relaxed Quiet Time seeking guidance for the day perhaps, but vitally important to a right understanding of how God runs his world.

[i] Residents [11:1-36]

The tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi were especially responsible for populating Jerusalem, although others lived there too. [1 Chronicles 9:3] Ten percent of the population lived in the city; a special presence to promote universal witness to the greatness and goodness of God. Christian assemblies wherever they gather are meant to have the same result, beginning where they are and extending into all the world. [Matthew 28:19-20]

[ii] Registers [12:1-26]

Israel's revival at this time came about because the people repented when confronted with the Word of God contained in the Law. This record of God's purpose for his world is the benchmark upon which spiritual progress is measured. History is important! The Registers show acceptance of their continuing responsibility on the part of Israel. They also demonstrate practice fortified by historic precedent; a significant principle when it is remembered that God does not change. As we progress in our Christian experience every step needs to be measured against the revealed Will of God in the scriptures.