

The Revival of God's People— Nehemiah 8:1-12

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please contact Pastor Derek at Derek.berry1990@gmail.com.

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Nehemiah 8:1-12...

Please stand for the reading of God's word:

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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,^v helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,^v and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹ And 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." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "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." ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went 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.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the preacher who came to have dinner with one of the families in his congregation. The woman of the house was delighted to have the minister in her home and wanted to impress him. She wanted the preacher to read something to the family after dinner. She asked one of her daughters, "darling; please get the good book. Go and get the book we love. Go get the book we read every day." The girl came back with the JCPenny catalog. The father redirected the young girl, using almost the same language the mother used, and this

time the girl returned with an issue of sports illustrated. I don't believe this story is true, but unfortunately, it could be for some of us.

A recent [LifeWay Research](#) study found that only 45 percent of those who regularly attend church read the Bible more than once a week. Over 40 percent of the people attending read their Bible occasionally, maybe once or twice a month. Almost 1 in 5 churchgoers say they *never* read the Bible—essentially the same number who read it daily. Believe it or not, our lack of biblical literacy has led to a lack of biblical doctrine. Lifeway Research found that while 67 percent of Americans believe heaven is a real place, 45 percent believe there are many ways to get there—including 1 in 5 evangelical Christians. More than half of evangelicals (59 percent) believe the Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being. If we look honestly around the visible churches in America, I think the moral failure will also be apparent. I didn't want to look up any statistics on the moral state of America, lest I spend the week weeping instead of preparing this message.

It is clear that when God's people shut themselves to His Word, there is doctrinal failure that leads to moral failure. And this is the devious plan of the enemy. In the powerful words of the great Theologian named Shai Linne,

“Tactic one, the bible, keep you from reading it, and if you're reading it, he'll try to keep you from believing it, and if you're believing it, he'll try to keep you from obedience.”

But we find something special in Nehemiah 8 with the Israelites. God, through his sovereign power, caused a revival within the hearts of the Israelites. This revival took place through

- I. *The reading of the Word of God (v 1-5)*
- II. *The understanding and belief in the Word of God (v 6-8)*
- III. *The response of worship and repentance to the Word of God (9-12)*

We have much to learn from this Jerusalem Bible Study that Nehemiah and Ezra led.

Let's set the context of the passage we'll examine this morning. Nehemiah was an Israelite who lived under the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes during the return of the Jewish exiles to the land of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was burdened by the broken-down walls and destroyed gates of Jerusalem. So, the Lord impressed it upon Nehemiah's heart to restore the city's walls. After receiving permission from King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and encourages his Israelite brothers to assist him with rebuilding the walls of the city. The first seven chapters of this book focus on rebuilding the walls. The last six chapters of this book focus on a much larger issue, rebuilding the people of God.

Chapter eight finds us reading the account of the Israelites after the walls have been completed. The text says, “And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.” So, what's the deal with this Ezra guy? Ezra was a priest for the Lord in Israel. God sent him to accomplish a task not so different than Nehemiah. More than ten years before the call of Nehemiah, Ezra was burdened with rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Even the book of Ezra is formatted in a similar fashion to that of Nehemiah. The first six chapters of Ezra focus on rebuilding the temple, and the last four chapters deal with rebuilding the people who had fallen into sin.

Ezra was known for his passion and competence in the Scriptures. The text states in

Ezra 7:10 "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and teach his statutes and rules in Israel."

Ezra had been serving faithfully in the land for 13 years, and now God has sparked a hunger for his Word in the people's hearts. This is why the New Testament declares for us to "...not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9), and also "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2). Ezra did not grow weary in his studying the Scriptures and seeking God, and he is now reaping a harvest. So many pastors, ministers, and Christians are under the illusion that we have the power and responsibility to save others from their sins. We are not called to change the hearts of men.

I remember when I was in high school, God gave me a huge heart to want to see my classmates saved. I was about sixteen years old and preached the gospel to all my friends. When I saw no conversions, I felt like I was doing something wrong or not saying the right words to my friends. This brought about depression and a feeling of inadequacy. That was until a brother in Christ explained the doctrines of grace to me. In his explanation, he made it clear from the Scriptures that God is the one who saves and that our job is to be faithful preachers and lovers of God and people. I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I was no longer attempting to play the role of God to my friends. Two years later, God saved three of my friends who sought to be in a Christian community to grow. It took my faithfulness in studying and preaching the Word, but God is the one who sparked the hunger in my friend's hearts.

This is what is taking place in Israel. The text makes it clear that the people sought to hear from the Law of the Lord. It was not the manipulation of man that caused this event but the work of God in man's heart. This hunger did not originate from the Israelites because David clarified, "The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:2-3). Man is dead in sin and cannot seek after God on his own. So, therefore, God has to initiate the hunger within man for him to seek after God and his Word. And this is what we find taking place in this text.

The reading of the Word of God. It's no coincidence that this law reading occurs on the first day of the seventh month. The Israelites are familiar with the writings of Moses. *Deuteronomy 31:9-13* states "Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess." It is most likely that Ezra has been teaching this

text to the Israelites in anticipation of this day. The people of God seek to establish the Law of God in their newly established city of Jerusalem.

“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. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. “(Nehemiah 8:2-4)

As the Word of God was read, the Israelites were single-minded and attentive to the Word. Although all these Israelites, and possible foreigners, were of different homes and socio-economic groups, they had a common desire to hear the Word of God. All other distinctive traits that would have customarily separated these people from fellowshiping with one another were eradicated. We should see this in the Church today, which is even more diverse than this group here, as Jesus Christ has revealed that his death on the cross was for a people in every nation, tribe, and tongue.

But the text says people were attentive to the Word of God. This is because they trusted and believed that the Word being read to them was the very Words of God himself. Bart Ehrman, a professor at the University of North Carolina who departed from the faith, once asked a class of students, “who believes the Bible is the actual words of God?” Many of the students raised their hands to agree. He then asked the students if they had read a well-known book at the time in its entirety. Again, many of the students’ hands were raised to agree. He asked the students, “Who has read the Bible?” Sadly, not many hands were raised after this last question. His point was that if you believe the Bible is indeed the Word of God, you will take reading it seriously.

These Israelites took this so seriously that they were attentive to a Bible reading plan that lasted from early morning until midday! If we believe the Bible contains the actual Word of God, then we should have the passion for seeking to read every word. But again, this passion does not originate from within; we must ask God to do a work in our hearts that will cause us to seek Him through His word. But it didn’t just stop at the reading of the Law.

The understanding and belief in the Word. We see that not only did the people hear the Word of God, but they also understood and believed it. The text says the Levites “helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:7b-8).

Implicitly, it’s taught that the people understood the Word of God through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. I remember a time I was watching one of the Avengers movies with my mom. For the entire movie, she was leaning over and asking me questions. She hadn’t seen the previous film, so she was utterly lost. To the best of my abilities, I answered all the semi-annoying questions that she asked me. When the movie was over, I made a list of the individual Avengers movies that came out before the one in which we viewed and instructed her

to watch them in order when she gets the chance. After eventually watching all of the previous movies, I observed that Avenger movie with her again, and it all made sense. For those of you who have no clue what I am referencing, all you need to know is that a plethora of superhero movies are all tied together, but you have to see all the movies, or you'll be lost. So, in the same film, she couldn't figure out what was happening; it all made sense to her once she received the illumination from the previous films.

Many individuals complain that the Bible is too complicated for them to understand. A part of that is just pure laziness, no doubt, but they are also missing an essential ingredient of genuinely understanding the Words found in Scripture. As we have already reviewed, man is dead in sin apart from God and unable to understand the things of God. Paul put it this way, *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Corinthians 2:14). This is why the Psalmist prays *"Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law"* (Psalm 119:18). God the Spirit must illuminate the Scriptures and the minds of his people for there to be comprehension. This is how an act of God and the manipulation of wicked leaders can be distinguished. The leaders of Israel are not seeking to manufacture some response from the Israelites to brag about how many converts they received at their preaching full of disco lights. But this is a work of God that sparked a hunger for God's Word and the comprehension of God's Word.

If you struggle to understand the truths in Scripture, I beseech you to seek the God of the Scriptures. The Spirit of God is the upper-case Author of the Scriptures. He can provide insight to understand and apply what is found in the text. But there is another practical point that we see here.

The Spirit of God uses community to help his people understand the Scriptures. We do not see people here in isolation reading the Law and coming up with their interpretations. Instead, we see the people of God assembled, and Levites accurately interpret the Word of God as it is being read. God did not create us to be island Christians. If you want to fall into sin and false doctrine, leave alone and attempt to live this Christian life in isolation. But here, we see that the understanding and belief of the Word is closely tied to the community of saints receiving the Word together. So, you need the illumination of the Scriptures and a close Christian community to understand the Word of God. This is what leads the Israelites to the last step of revival.

The response of worship and repentance to the Word of God. We see the response of worship from the congregation found in verse 6, "And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground." Here it's made clear that the Israelites realize that they are not listening to Ezra's voice but rather to God's. The only proper response to hearing the voice of God is worship. The Israelites used their members, hands, mouths, and bodies, to worship the Lord God while reading His Word.

Before I get to the point in the text, I want to take a quick commercial break. Because there is implicit teaching here in the text. Sometimes there is a need to examine our social protocol to

determine whether or not the Scriptures support what we have been practicing. Many of us have been socially conditioned not to sing aloud in church. I'm not here to pontificate about styles of worship. I'm here to point to the Scriptures and show how worshiping God involves lifting our voices to sing to him and one another. Now the word for "worship" simply means to bow. But often, the authors use this term to denote a visible portrait of an inner truth manifested. And sometimes, our lack of singing can betray what the truth is. This is a beautiful text because it displays what we cannot do on our own: responding to God in visible worship as the cooperate body of Christ. This is very beneficial to the corporate gathering. Husbands, it is beneficial for your wives to hear you singing praises to God. Wives, it is beneficial for your children to listen to you singing praises to God. Church, it is beneficial for other believers and nonbelievers to witness us praise God as one people through song. It doesn't matter how much of an introvert you are; singing is an actual command in the Scriptures. We'll cover this in more detail in a subsequent message in our doctrine of the church series.

Today we've made a dangerous distinction between the exposition of the Scriptures and formal worship time. In many Churches, though not all, it is acceptable to worship God with your voice and hands while singing songs to the Lord. But during the sermon, everyone is expected to stay quiet because "worship time" ended after the last song. But the Israelites don't view worship the way many of us do. The Israelites equated the exposition of the Scriptures as being a time worthy enough to worship the Lord. We need to get into the routine of understanding that the reading and exposition of the Scriptures is a time to celebrate and worship God for who He is and what He has accomplished through His Son. The Israelites both rose to their feet when the Word of God was read, and they bowed to their knees in worship as it was being read. It is not the Law or the Bible that we are called to worship, but the God of the Law and the Bible whom we adore as believers.

Not only did they respond in worship, but the text says that the Israelites began to "weep" as the Word of God was read. This resulted from God's true worship and holiness being put on full display. Whenever we come in contact with the righteousness of God, if we respond that we have it all together, it wasn't indeed God we encountered, but rather just an emotional experience. When Isaiah saw the Lord seated on high, he first realized how short he fell from the Lord's glory, and he proclaimed, "wow is me; I am a man of unclean lips!"

In this walk as a Christian, the closer we get to the Lord, two things happen. A. God grows us in holiness. He uses his Word, Spirit, People, Suffering, and other things to sanctify and grow his people in holiness. But the equal truth is that the closer we get to God, the more we see our sinfulness and need to repent. This is what is happening with the Israelites. They are weeping because they're experiencing the holiness of God through the reading of the Scriptures, which is causing them to weep, which is a sign of repentance. If you continue reading Nehemiah, we see that the people turn from sin to serve God.

As the Israelites were weeping, they were told by Nehemiah and company not to grieve "because the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8:10). The joy and pleasure of the Lord have been found in returning his people to their land using them to rebuild the temple and walls, and in the people themselves. Their stronghold is God's joy in saving and restoring them. So, the Lord's joy preserves them and is their stronghold. God can find joy in his people, although

sinful, due to the coming Messiah! God the Father is pleased with his Son. Jesus Christ came down from heaven and took on human flesh to fulfill the very Law that Ezra is reading. Although the Israelites, and you and I, cannot perfectly fulfill the Law, this is the requirement of God. But Jesus fulfilled it on our behalf, went to the cross, and suffered the punishment that we deserved at the hands of His Father. He was raised three days later to validate His claims and victory over sin, death, and the grave. So now, if we place faith in the finished work of Jesus, God is pleased with us. He delights in us as He delights in His perfect Son. This gospel truth moves us to read God's Word, believe it, and respond with worship and repentance.

Let's pray.