

Rebuilding the Ruins: A Series in Nehemiah

Rebuilding Upon the Word of God (Nehemiah 8:1-18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on March 24, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ We've been working through the book of Nehemiah, which, up to this point, has been all about rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem. It was a critical project for a number of reasons that we've already covered. The most obvious is the need for physical safety and protection. In ancient days, a city without walls would be vulnerable to attack. Fortified walls and locked gates were a must. For the physical safety of the inhabitants.
 - But as important as that is, Nehemiah knows that's not the highest priority. **What's more fundamental than physical safety is spiritual health.** Keeping people safe from physical attacks is only a bandaid solution if their spiritual condition is neglected and left in peril. That's why you see a shift in chapter 8 – after they've rebuilt the physical walls of the city – they immediately focus on rebuilding the spiritual lives of its inhabitants. With particular attention on the Word of God. **Nehemiah works together with Ezra to make sure that God's Word is cemented as the very foundation of this newly reconstituted people of God.** Because the spiritual health of Israel is equally important – if not more – than their physical safety.

- ❖ This is a lesson that Christian parents have to learn. Our gut instinct is to want to protect our kids. To keep them safe. And that's a good and natural instinct. But it's often a dominating instinct. **To the point that our children's physical safety becomes our preeminent concern.** So if their kids have food allergies, some parents will be all over that – being super vigilant about what their kids eat and put in their bodies. But those same parents will have no idea what their kids are putting into their minds and hearts on TikTok or Instagram.
 - Parents might be resistant to the idea of sending their child on a missions trip to a religiously-restrictive country or to an inner city context littered with crime and homelessness. But those same parents would gladly send their child to a highly-secular, godless college campus as long as its Ivy League.
 - You get the point. Our instinct to protect our children physically is already well established. **But what we need to be equally concerned with – or even more so – is the spiritual state of their soul.** In particular, that means doing what we can to ensure that God's Word is foundational to their developing identities and their growing sense of calling and purpose.

- ❖ That's what we see Nehemiah and Ezra doing in our text. They set the Word of God as the foundation of this spiritual community. **And the way they go about doing it is by conducting a massive worship service.** All the returned exiles in all the surrounding towns and villages assemble in Jerusalem. And in the span of two days, Scripture is read aloud for hours to a gathered congregation and studied carefully in smaller groups. Resulting in mixed emotions. There's weeping and there's rejoicing. And there's glad obedience to the Lord.
 - **As we walk through chapter 8, we'll make three observations of this ancient worship service.** Which would characterize any personal life or any household also founded on the Word of God. (1) The priority of hearing God's Word. (2) The power from understanding God's Word. (3) The pleasure found in obeying God's Word.

The Priority of Hearing God's Word

- ❖ Let's begin in vv1-8. We immediately observe **the priority of hearing God's Word**. In v1, we're told that "*all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate.*"
 - Back in chapter 7:56, we're told that the whole assembly of returned exiles totaled 42,360. That's a huge congregation. That's megachurch size. All of them gathered in a public square located near the Water Gate, located on the eastern side of the city. It was the closest gate to the Gihon Spring, which was the city's main water supply. So the Water Gate was a well-utilized gate, serving as a center of communal life. **So imagine a large, central, public square where over 40,000 could gather.** Think of Discovery Green in Downtown Houston.
 - And what are they gathered to do? To hear the Word of God read out loud. Look at v1, "*And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.*"
- ❖ This is the first mention of Ezra in the book of Nehemiah. But if you recall, we said before that originally Ezra-Nehemiah was a singular work of literature. It got split up into two books much later on in the Christian era. **So original readers would've already been acquainted with Ezra.** He was the Levitical scribe and priest introduced back in Ezra 7 – commissioned by King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem to teach the Law of Moses. To reestablish Israel's covenant commitment to live under God's Law.
 - **So before this gathered assembly of 40,000 plus, Ezra is prepared to read from the Book of the Law of Moses.** In other words, from the Torah – also known as the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses.
- ❖ Now notice who was present in this assembly. Look at v2, "*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.*" So there were men and women present. And even children! All who could understand what was being read.
 - I think that's rather instructive for God's people today. **If God's people in Nehemiah's day, made it a point to include even small children in the gathered assembly – to hear God's Word being read – then why wouldn't we?** Any school-aged child can understand the words being read from Scripture. That's for sure. And that was the minimum expectation, "*all who could understand what they heard.*"
- ❖ I know someone might push back and say, "Okay, five-year olds might understand the individual words being read from Nehemiah 8. But they can't put it all together. They don't understand the larger point being made or the theological concepts conveyed. Sure. But we'll see, a few verses later, that designated teachers worked with people in smaller groups to help make sense of the reading. **So that's what parents can do for their small children. You can expose them to the public reading – and preaching – of God's Word. Then you can take them aside later to "give the sense", so that they hopefully understand the larger point of the text.**

- ❖ **Notice, in v3, how long these men, women, and children stood attentive to the reading of God’s Word.** It says that Ezra read from “*early morning until midday,*” and “*the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.*” Now commentators say that amounted to five to six hours of listening to Scripture.
 - Now you might be thinking, “No way. That must be an exaggeration. No way they listened to the Law being read for five to six hours straight.” **But maybe our incredulity is more of an indictment against our diminished ability to listen attentively to God’s Word.** Maybe our disbelief reveals how much we take Scripture for granted and how we lack a similar hunger to hear God’s truth proclaimed.

- ❖ **But you might still be wondering how it was logistically possible for Ezra to stand there reading for five to six hours straight and for the people to just listen.** Did anyone need a potty break? To get a sip of water? How could they keep going non-stop? Well, if we keep reading, we learn that there was a logistical plan in place.
 - In v4, we learn that a wooden platform was built for this purpose. And it was large enough to fit Ezra and thirteen other brothers who likely assisted him in the reading. **So he wasn’t reading non-stop by himself for five-six hours.** And, as we just pointed out, there were teachers spread out among the congregation to help give the sense. They’re mentioned in v7. Another thirteen brothers who “*helped the people to understand the Law.*” Listen to v8, “*They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*”

- ❖ In the ESV, there’s a footnote next to the word “*clearly.*” It says the Hebrew word could also be translated as “with interpretation” or “paragraph by paragraph.” **So likely what was happening was that Ezra (or one of the others) would read a portion of the Law and then pause.** And then the Levitical teachers among the congregation would repeat it clearly to those around them, providing interpretation, giving the sense of the text. And they did this systematically – working through the entire Pentateuch, paragraph by paragraph.

- ❖ So that’s how this massive worship service was conducted. **But what I want you to notice is the people’s unified response to the Word of God.** As it was clearly and carefully read and explained. Listen to v5, “*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.*”
 - **Church, that’s why we make a point of standing as a congregation whenever the Word of God is read.** Because we want to convey the same reverence as the Israelites did in our text. We instinctively rise at a ballgame when the national anthem is sung or in a classroom when the Pledge of Allegiance is recited. We rise and stand up out of respect. So it’s fitting to do the same whenever God’s Word is read.
 - Let’s keep reading in v6, “*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.*”

- ❖ **Most people probably think that the reading of Scripture is a passive element in our corporate worship.** It's not like congregational singing where we actively participate. When it's Scripture Reading time, we just stand there and passively listen.
 - But that certainly wasn't the case for God's people in Nehemiah 8. **They actively listened. They responded to the Word being read – even physically.** Moving upwards in praise with their hands. And then downwards in a submissive posture – lying prostrate with their faces to the ground. And they responded verbally with hearty Amens. Which is Hebrew for “Let it be!”
 - All of that is meant to convey that overall sense of reverence and awe towards God and his Word. **In fact, even the architecture of that wooden platform – that ancient pulpit – sent a message.** It was designed to communicate that the Word of God should be highly exalted. And listeners should stand *underneath* the Word in a posture of reverent awe and humble submission.

- ❖ **Church, I encourage you to use this passage as a gauge – to test your general attitude and posture towards the reading of God's Word.** How do you compare to these returned exiles? Who come across so hungry for the Word. Who stand in rapt attention when it's read. What is your attention span like when it comes to the reading of God's Word, whether in private devotion or in corporate worship? **Do you recognize yourself at all in these descriptions of God's people reacting to God's Word read?**
 - Perhaps some of you feel bad right now. Because your typical reaction to the reading of God's Word is far less eager and far more indifferent. If you're feeling convicted because of what you're reading in Scripture, then just know that that's to be expected.

The Power From Understanding God's Word

- ❖ That's what happens when we come to understand God's Word. We're led to conviction. That's the reaction we observe in vv9-12. This leads to our second observation: **The power that comes from having a clear understanding of God's Word.**
 - When Scripture is read and the truth of God is expounded, it can feel like a sword piercing your soul. The Bible describes it as being “*cut to the heart.*” (Acts 2:37) You're convicted of sin. Of falling short of his glory. Of having broken his covenant.

- ❖ **According to what you heard in the Word – not only have you thought, felt, and done what is evil and wicked – you've failed to think, feel, and do what is good and righteous.** As the Scriptures are read and explained, our hearts our often laid bare.
 - **Clearly, a deep sense of conviction fell upon the people of God that day as Ezra read from the Law.** Look at v9, “*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.*”

- ❖ Their tears were tears of sorrow. Tears of remorse. Tears that flow out of a deep conviction of sin. **But notice how both Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levitical teachers went around instructing the people *not* to mourn and *not* to weep.** Why? Was it wrong for them to react that way? Is sorrow for sin an inappropriate reaction when the Law is read?
 - No, it's not wrong to react that way. There is an appropriate time for mourning our sin. But not on *that* day. That day, according to Nehemiah and Ezra, "*is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.*"

- ❖ **Here's where we need a little Old Testament background.** We skipped over an observation in v2. Notice how this massive worship service was being conducted, "*on the first day of the seventh month [September-October].*" That's significant. Because, according to the Law, the first day of the seventh month was a feast day in the Jewish calendar.
 - That's what we learn in **Leviticus 23**. Most commentators think that was the particular passage being carefully studied on the second day, as mentioned in v13. It had to do with the Feast of Booths. But before that, Leviticus 23 talks about the Feast of Trumpets that takes place on the first day of the seventh month. It was to be observed as a day of solemn rest where you refrain from any ordinary work.

- ❖ Instead, you're to spend that day in worship and joyful celebration with the people of God. You may have heard it called Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year's Day. Now that day's celebration is held for a reason. **Because you're preparing for what will occur on the tenth day of the seventh month.** Let me continue reading in Leviticus 23:26, "²⁶*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ²⁷*Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD.*"
 - **The tenth day of the seventh month was the holiest of days in the Jewish year.** It was the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The day in which the high priest would offer a holy sacrifice that would atone for the sins of the people for that past year. By his mercy, the LORD would pass over their sins. It was a day of deliverance. And on that day, it says the people were to afflict themselves. Which means to fast from food or drink. **So on *that* day, there is to be fasting and mourning and weeping as they reflect on their sin and their need for atonement.**

- ❖ **But on *this* day – the first day of the seventh month, on Rosh Hashanah – you are to wipe away those tears and focus your heart on the joy of the LORD who is your strength.** Listen to vv10-11, "¹⁰*Then he [Nehemiah] 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."*"
 - This day is holy. Set apart for joyful celebration before the LORD and his people. You are to eat delicious food. That's what's in mind when it says to eat the fat – the tastiest portion. And to drink sweet wine. And to joyfully share with those around you in need. And why do this? **Why put aside your grief and embrace your joy?**

- ❖ **For the joy of the LORD is your strength.** That word for *strength* can be translated as “your mountain stronghold.” Your Helm’s Deep. Your impenetrable fortress. If that is who the LORD is for you, then you have a thousand reasons to rejoice and to be glad in him.
 - I can picture this massive gathering of returned exiles, hearing Ezra read through Exodus and Numbers. **Recounting all the instances of God rolling up his sleeves and extending his mighty arm to save their ancestors from folly.** Delivering them from slavery, even as it was the consequence of their own sin and idolatry.
 - And as the people heard the Word and as the sense was given, they went back to their towns and villages, eating and drinking, with great rejoicing. Why? Look at v12, “*Because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*” **A good understanding of Scripture will lead to a great rejoicing of the soul.** That’s the real power that comes from understanding God’s Word.

- ❖ **Friends, could it be that a lack of joy in our Christian lives is explainable by a lack of a clear understanding in what we’re reading in Scripture?** Very often we’re just going through the motions of our Bible reading. Just breezing through. Pushing through. And look, it’s better that we breeze through the Word than to neglect it altogether.
 - **But don’t be satisfied with a cursory, superficial understanding.** If a deeper understanding of Scripture is what you lack, then take advantage of the multiple opportunities that our church provides to help give you that deeper sense. **Maybe you need a smaller group of believers to help you discuss the Word and apply its truths.** Join a community group or take part in Community Bible Study, which we host in our building on Thursday mornings.

- ❖ **Perhaps you need help to synthesize what you’re reading – to connect the dots, to draw out from your reading a deeper theological sense of the text.** I know a good book that accomplishes that. It’s called *God’s Big Picture* by Vaughn Roberts. It was so helpful for me when I read it years ago. It put all the books of the Bible together in one, clear, overarching biblical theology. Why don’t you get two copies and give one to a friend, challenging each other to read and discuss it together?

The Pleasure Found in Obeying God’s Word

- ❖ Having a friend who keeps you accountable is so important. Because the goal of Bible reading is not just understanding, but for that understanding to translate into action. Into joyful obedience. Which is what we see in vv13-18. This leads to our third observation: **The pleasure found in obeying God’s Word.**
 - If you look in v13, we’re told that, on the second day, after all the peoples had returned home, the heads of all the households stayed one day longer for a more intensive Bible study with Ezra and the other priests and Levites.

- ❖ **In the course of their study – when they got to Leviticus 23 – they realized they’d been failing to observe the Feast of Booths as written in the Law.** Look at v14, *“¹⁴And 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.”*
 - The Feast of Booths was the third big feast held in the seventh month. **It started on the 15th and for seven days you and your family would construct makeshift booths out of branches and live in them for a week.** And each day, you’d feast with those around you. On the eighth day, you’d conclude with a solemn assembly. **And the point of the Feast was to recall and relive the wilderness experience of their forefathers.** Who for forty years wandered the wilderness, living in makeshift booths, but being sustained by the good grace and awesome power of God.

- ❖ Now I know it says, v17, that, *“from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so.”* Which gives the impression that they had completely neglected this feast for all this time. But we know from biblical texts that the Feast was observed in the days of King Solomon (1 Kg 8:65) or even more recently in Ezra 3:4. **So I think what wasn’t happening, since the days of Joshua, was specifically the constructing and living within these makeshift booths for seven days.**
 - That’s the particular instruction, found in the text, that had been widely overlooked for all those centuries. But now, the people of God realize their neglect, which led to their weeping and grieving. And according to v18, they follow through with complete obedience to the Word. *“And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.”*

- ❖ **I think the Feast of Booths was so special and meaningful for them because there’s a wonderful parallel that can be drawn between the people in Joshua’s day and the returned exiles in Nehemiah’s day.** Both groups would’ve found themselves celebrating the Feast of Booths – after settling in God’s Promised Land, after a lengthy season of exile.
 - They were both cast out in the wilderness – literally and spiritually. **So while they lived in temporary, makeshift homes, the focus was on God’s faithfulness to protect them and preserve them.** To lead them back to a more permanent home.

- ❖ According to rabbinic sources, the Feast was observed every year from that time on. **And by the first-century, in the days of Christ, it had become one of the more popular feasts.** Where Jews would quite often make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Where they would construct their temporary booths and celebrate together for eight days.
 - **These rabbinic sources tells us a particular ceremony that took place on the first to the seventh day. It was a water-pouring ceremony.** Where priest would draw water from the Pool of Siloam, at the south end of the city, and make a processional march back to the temple grounds on the north end. And each day, they would pour the water out at the base of the altar of God. It’s how they recalled and rejoiced in the LORD’s provision of life-giving water to their forefathers in the wilderness.

- ❖ **That piece of background information is helpful in elucidating something Jesus said in John 7 when he was there in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Booths.** Let me read John 7:37-39, “³⁷*On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” ³⁹Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive.”

 - It’s fair to assume that Jesus said these words in light of the water-pouring ceremony that took place over the past seven days. It’s like he was saying to the crowds, “**As the LORD God provided water to your forefathers, I’m here to provide living water to those who come to me. I’m offering you the life-giving Spirit.**” Jesus gives you something far more satisfying than water – he gives you the Holy Spirit.*

- ❖ The point I’m trying to make is that there certainly is pleasure to be found in the act of obeying God’s Word. There is cause for rejoicing in our obedience. **But what we’re told, in the gospel, is that true obedience is a Spirit-filled, Spirit-wrought obedience.**
 - A grit-your-teeth, mere obedience, as an act of sheer willpower, will not glorify God. And neither will it satisfy your soul and lead to the great rejoicing you see in our text. **The kind of obedience that produces great joy is the kind that the Spirit of God brings about within you.** So that you willingly and gladly obey the Word.

- ❖ **If you don’t know this joy – and yet you’ve been trying to obey God’s Law all your life – perhaps you’ve been doing that on your own strength.** Out of your own flesh. What you need is for the Holy Spirit to come into your heart and transform it. So that out of your heart flows a glad submission to the Bible’s authority and a joyful obedience to all of its commands. The text says that the Spirit is available to all who believe in Jesus. Would you put your trust in him today?