



"A Community of the Word" (Nehemiah 7-8)

1. INTRO

- A. I became a Christian during my sophomore year in college. As I was choosing my classes for the upcoming semester I noticed a course offering titled, "The Bible as Literature."
1. I had never noticed a course like that so I thought it would be a great opportunity to get course credit for reading my Bible!
 2. The first day of class was very confusing for me. It quickly became apparent that this woman knew the Bible very, very well – but that she did not believe a single word of it.
 3. This was at the height of the Jesus People Movement in Orange County in the early 1970's and there were other Christians in the class and she relished each and every opportunity to pushback on anything and everything the Christians would say. (I was fairly quiet being a brand new believer.)
 4. Over the course of that semester, as I read, studied, and listened to all the classroom drama, I came to a conclusion that has stuck with me to this day:
The Bible is the only book in existence that requires intimacy with the Author to fully comprehend its contents.
- B. That statement will be the main focus of our study from Nehemiah today.
- C. Before we read our text in Neh I want to share with you one of my go-to NT verses. Whenever I get confused reading and studying the Bible, I am often reminded of this verse:
- "For the [Holy] Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God." --1 Corinthians 2:10b*
- D. With this in mind let's turn to Nehemiah 8. Before I read it I will let you know that Neh 7 is primarily a genealogy identifying the people who had returned to the region of Judah with Zerubbabel about 100 years earlier. Additionally, it is almost an exact duplicate of Ezra 2.

1. Here is what chapter 7 is about:
 - a. Chapter 7 serves as a dividing line in the Book of Nehemiah.
 - 1) Chapters 1-6 describe the restoration of the wall and the gates of Jerusalem.
 - 2) Chapters 8-13 tell about the restoration of the people of Judah.
 - b. In chapter 7 Nehemiah is seeking to accomplish (at least) two things:
 - 1) Nehemiah wanted to give credit to those who had returned to do the work during the crises.
 - 2) Nehemiah was transitioning from rebuilding the wall and the gates to instituting specific reforms as they repopulated the city of Jerusalem in order to reestablish it as a THE vital center for the active presence of God – as well as Jewish national and spiritual life.
 - c. Nehemiah was aware that God's people must keep themselves pure and holy according to God's commands—it's not about racial superiority or legalistic pride but because God purposed to bring great blessing to them and through them to the whole earth.
 - 1) God's commands are always for the purpose of enjoying God's blessing.
 - 2) And through it all we remember the **gospel**: Our pursuit of purity and holiness is a response TO God's favor, not the prerequisite FOR God's favor.
2. Now I will read Neh 8, then I will pray and we will attempt to discover what it has to say to us: *“And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. ² Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴ Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which 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 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!' while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low 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, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. ⁸ They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

"This Day Is Holy"

⁹ Then 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 were weeping when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, 'Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.' ¹² All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

Feast of Booths Restored

¹³ Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. ¹⁴ They found written in the law how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. ¹⁵ So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, 'Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.' ¹⁶ So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. ¹⁸ He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day

to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn [or sacred] assembly according to the ordinance.”
[pray...]

2. BODY

A. This chapter can be divided up into three main points:

1. **Vs. 1-8: God's people reestablish the centrality of God's Word.**
2. **Vs. 9-12: God's people reestablish the joy of the Lord, which became their strength.**
3. **Vs. 13-18: God's people reestablish biblical patterns for regular (i.e., consistent) worship and study.**

B. Let's look at them one at a time:

1. **Vs. 1-8: God's people reestablish the centrality of God's Word.**
 - a. They came together to listen, learn, and worship “*as one man*” (v. 1 ff); they became unified and focused as a nation. (Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem 13-years before Nehemiah did.)
 - b. When they heard the Torah read the people began to repent, mourn, and weep (v. 9).
 - c. God's people were beginning to get back on track. Perhaps the security of the wall being completed helped them to refocus and reestablish??
2. **Vs. 9-12: God's people are reestablished in the joy of the Lord, which became their strength.**
 - a. Nehemiah and Ezra said, “*Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength*” (v. 10).
 - b. What does it mean for the “*joy of the LORD*” to become our strength?
 - 1) The Hebrew word for strength literally means a place of safety or protection, a stronghold or a fortress.
 - 2) It's not the wall, which makes us strong – it is finding our joy in God that is the basis for our strength!
 - 3) The joy of the Lord would unite them, encourage them, make them brave, and stimulate them to serve God's purposes.
 - 4) The joy of the Lord would protect them against evil.

- 5) The joy of the Lord would impart to them an inward power to do the will of God and to endure difficult times, and overcome temptation—this is how joy becomes a stronghold for God's people.
- c. We should certainly ask, "Where do we find the joy of the LORD?" (4)
- 1) Our joy is IN God—Through His Word and our understanding of it; through God's patience, perfections, mercy, and grace.
 - 2) Our joy is FROM God. It should be noted that all joy comes from God as a gift – whether it be the innocent pleasures of sense, reason, friendships; or the higher spiritual joys of God's affirming presence in our lives accompanied by the fruit of the Spirit, which includes "*the joy of the Lord*" (Galatians 5:22).
 - 3) Our joy is WITH God--We are capable of fellowship with God in His joy.
 - 4) Our joy is directed TO God—In worship, adoration, with gratitude and love, and in cheerful generosity with our time energy, and resources.
- d. How should joy be expressed? (The text gives us two ways...)
- 1) Our joy is to be expressed by feasting. This reminds me of Acts 2:46-47: "*Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,* ⁴⁷ *praising God and having favor with all the people...*" --Acts 2:46-47
 - 2) Our joy should always overflow in charity.
 - a) "*Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared*" (v. 10).
 - b) This is invariably the result of those who find their lives beginning to be healed by the Word of God. They start thinking of others and want to share with them what they have.
 - c) Jesus esteems kindness to the poor as kindness to Himself (Mat 25:40).

3. Vs. 13-18: God's people reestablish biblical patterns for regular (i.e., consistent) worship and study.

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- a. We also see that team ministry began to flourish in their midst.
- 1) Nehemiah, Ezra, and the other leaders along with the priests formed a leadership team that provided enough safety and security for the people to turn their attention more completely to God and His Word – which they did...
 - 2) Until now, Nehemiah has been in the forefront. He was a gifted leader and administrator who could organize and mobilize people to get the wall built. But when it came time to teach the Word, he took a back seat to Ezra, who was skilled in the law of Moses. Ezra had set his heart to study it, practice it, and teach it (see Ezra 7:6, 10). These two men illustrate beautifully the principle of team ministry.
 - 3) "Unconcerned about having his name in lights, Nehemiah stepped aside and strengthened the overall project with fresh reinforcements--people like Ezra who was better than he in the handling of the Scripture. And as Ezra did his job, Nehemiah stood among the people applying the truth that was proclaimed. It posed no problem for him to step aside and have his wall project virtually ignored because a far more significant activity was taking place among the people. Why? His mindset was unselfish." -- Chuck Swindoll ¹
 - 4) "The way to get things done is not to mind who gets the credit." - Benjamin Jowett ²
- b. We see that heads of households sought insight into God's Word (vs. 13-14). They were not satisfied just hearing the Word, they wanted to understand it and grasp it in a way that they could appropriate it into their everyday living.
- c. They sought to become "*doers of the Word*" (vs. 15-18b) "*But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of*

¹ *Hand Me Another Brick*, Thomas Nelson, 2007: 132.

² Quoted in John Gross' *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*. Jowett (1817-1893) was an English clergyman, educator, and classicist.

person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.” --James 1:22-25

- d. *“There was great rejoicing”* (v. 17). Indeed, the joy of the Lord became their strength:

“Holy joy will be the oil to the wheels of our obedience.” --Matthew Henry³

- C. They prepared themselves for a Sacred Assembly (v. 18c). As we will see in chapter 9 a sacred assembly is a time to come together and confess both corporate and personal sins. Remember what Nehemiah prayed in 1:6: *“Let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father’s house have sinned.”* --Nehemiah 1:6

3. CONCLUSION

- A. Chuck Swindoll tells of a time when he spoke at a family conference and noticed a young couple with several small children. Although they looked and sounded like a Christian family, it was evident to Swindoll that they were miserable. He sensed that divorce was on the back burner of their minds.
- B. But as the week progressed, he saw that couple change as they listened to the teaching of God's Word. The husband hung on every word. The wife had her Bible open and followed the messages closely. At the end of the week, this couple came up to Swindoll and his wife and said, “We want you to know that this week has been a 180-degree turnaround experience for us. When we came, we were ready to separate. We’re going back stronger than we have ever been in our marriage.” But that joyous news was dampened by another family's response. Chuck continues...
- C. At the same conference with the same speakers, the same truths, the same surroundings, the same schedule, another father was turned off. He wasn't open. He attended the first few sessions, but by and by the guilt became so great and the

³ Quoted in: *Be Joyful (Philippians): Even When Things Go Wrong, You Can Have Joy* (The BE Series Commentary), by Warren Wiersbe; Cook Pub, Rev Ed 2008: 102-103.

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conviction so deep that he went home. His family left hurting—perhaps even more than when they came.

- D. What was the difference? Swindoll says, “attitude.” The couple who benefited had teachable hearts. The other man did not.⁴
- E. Some people come to church with reverence for God and His Word, saying, “God, teach me! I want to know You more!” They are ready to respond to the Word. They profit from the teaching. Others come to the same service with sin in their hearts that they don't want to deal with. They are turned off by the very same sermon that helps others to grow. If you want spiritual renewal, check your heart. Spiritual renewal comes when responsive hearts read and reverently hear God's Word faithfully proclaimed.

⁴ *Hand Me Another Brick*, Thomas Nelson 2007: 152-153.

P.A.S.S. Questions For KHC Life Group Leaders (or personal study)

Sermon Dates: March 12-13, 2016

Sermon Title: A Community of the Word

Sermon Passage: Nehemiah 7-8

P - Participation (get everyone involved in the dialog)

1. How can a non-studious person develop a hunger to read and study God's Word?

A - Application (makes it personal)

2. How can we develop the kind of responsive hearts that are needed to profit from God's Word?
3. What happens when the people truly understand God's Word? (See 8:9-11)
4. Why do think they responded in this way?

S - Scripture (thinking biblically is a learned behavior! :-)

4. How do Ezra and Nehemiah say the joy of the Lord can become our strength?
5. What's the difference between happiness and joy?

S – Sharing (aim for a time of honest reflection, authenticity, and transparency in a safe atmosphere modeled by you).

6. What has God's forgiveness meant for you?