

A People Under the Word

Nehemiah 8:1-18

I want to talk to you about the role of the Word of God in the life of the people of God.

As this New Year dawns, I think it's appropriate for our first two sermons to be about *prayer and Scripture*.

In 2017, let us give ourselves more and more to prayer and the Word.

If you're not familiar with **Nehemiah**, allow me to introduce the book to you.

The Historical Situation

1. **Israel and Judah split around 930BC, and in 722**, the **Assyrians** conquer Israel.
2. Judah held on until **586** when **Babylon**, under Nebuchadnezzar, drops the hammer. (**2 Chron 36:16-19**). They destroy the walls, the temple, and treasures, etc. Jerusalem was leveled.
3. In 539, **Persians** came to power. By taking out Babylon, God made a way for his people to return to the land.
 - a. The first Jews return under the leadership of **Zerubbabel in 538**. The temple was eventually finished (between 520-515)
 - b. **Ezra** and another wave arrives around **458**
 - c. **Nehemiah** arrives in 445, 13 years later, **445**, a layman, whom God uses to lead the rebuilding of the walls.
 - i. **It had been** 141 years since the walls stood
 - ii. Chs 1-7, Restoring the Walls (a story of prayer, unity, overcoming opposition)
 - iii. Chs 8-13 – Restoring Worship

Chapters 1-7 record the restoring of the physical walls of the city.

Chapters 8–13 record the restoring of *spiritual life of the people*: proclaiming the Word (chap. 8), confessing sin (chap. 9), dedicating the walls (chaps 10–12), and making final reforms (chap. 13).

They needed more than a physically secure city; more than a financially stable city; more than a well-governed city; they needed A Word-Saturated City.

Personal/Corporate Revival

This story about the recovery of the Word teaches us much about “revival.”

- I don't know what you think when you hear that word – a schedule service, a tent revival, all manner of emotional outbursts, etc.
- In Scripture, we read of various revivals.

The word itself can mean “**physical reviving**” sometimes (eg., raising someone from sickness/death)

- But more often it refers to reviving the **spiritually lethargic, apathetic, bored** – bringing them renewed love and joy and devotion to God.

Another way to think about Revival is that it’s the **intensification** of what God is always doing.

- He’s always saving, speaking, healing, calling, confronting, lifting, etc.
- But in revival, these things happen with **greater intensity to more people.**

In an article on Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening, J.I. Packer noted ten elements that are present during “revival.” He draws **these elements from the book of Acts in particular** (which were also noted in Edward’s revival writings):

1. **God comes down.**
2. **God’s Word pierces.**
3. **Man’s sin is seen.**
4. **Christ’s cross is valued.**
5. **Change goes deep. [which Packer illustrates with Acts 19:18-19]**
6. **Love breaks out.**
7. **Joy fills hearts.**
8. **Each church becomes itself.... God is felt to be there, present to bless, in the midst of those who are his.**
9. **The lost are found.**
10. **Satan keeps pace. (J.I. Packer, in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things*, 100-04)**

Many of these features are observable in Nehemiah 8.

We can’t schedule revival.

As it’s often said, **we can stack the wood, but only God can send the fire.**

The wood includes: **word and prayer** and the continued **exaltation of Jesus Christ.**

Let’s focus our attention today on the relationship between revival and the Word of God.

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;*

Psalm 19:7

In a different book, JI Packer says that **in chapter 8 that “God takes over.”**

- He has been in control of everything thus far in rebuilding the walls, illustrated by the fact that the walls are built **in just 52 days** – “with the help of our God” (**6:16**).

- Again, **God is always at work**. God is at work here at IDC.
- But now, as Packer says, **God “visits His people” in special way**. It’s an **intensification of God’s work**.
- And His visiting of them shows up with an intense **hunger for the Word of God**.

We read this passage and we’re lead to say in the spirit of **Psalm 126, “Do it again! You have **done this sort of thing before, do it again!**”**

6 Observations

Allow me to walk through this story, and then close with some application.

You’ll notice **the obvious corporate nature of this revival**, underscored in several ways, such as the emphasis on the word **“people.”** The word **“people”** occurs **thirteen times** in **8:1-12**, and the phrase **“all the people”** occurs in **nine of those instances**.

- They are rallying around the Word!
- The **group** is the most important character in the story (other than the Sovereign Lord)!

You can think of these as just six observations; or, better yet, **six prayers for this to happen among us as a people**.

#1: The People Desire the Word Eagerly (8:1-2)

V. 1 “All the people” – 30-50,000 people!

The whole town is shut down.

- **Can you imagine? “I went to get gas. It’s closed. I went to Sams (Samiahas). No one’s there. Where are they?” “No, it’s not a snowstorm... they’re listening to Ezra preach for six hours!” (V. 3 - "early morning to midday")**

“As one man” – Together, **they stand up for 6 hours in the heat! In the Middle East!!!**

- This is an inconvenience to say the least.
- But it doesn’t **matter when you are consumed with the Word**.

“Before the Water gate” - **where Richard Nixon grew up**. Not really.

- This is a big public assembly.

1b: Their Desire is evidenced by their request: “They told Ezra to bring the book!”

You can imagine them chanting, **“We want Ezra, we want Ezra...”**

Ezra isn’t **not running around trying to invite people to his Bible study at the Water Gate** – **they are inviting the teacher to come teach!**

Churches should demand it of it’s leaders!

Notice something:

Ezra had been doing the same thing for 14 years with no extraordinary revivals!

But Now, **something amazing/surprising** happened.

- Jonathan Edwards: the first time “Sinners” was preached it had little effect in Northampton, but then in Enfield, boom! God took over.

To all teachers: Be **faithful in times when you see little effect** .

- God always uses his word to bring change, **but in some seasons there are remarkable responses.**
- You might say that **Ezra saw more responsiveness in one day than in 14 years.**
- You can imagine the joy that must of surged through his veins!

I love **Ezra 7:10**

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

That’s the job of the teachers.

And then beg God to pour out His Spirit like this! (Acts 6:4)

This has always been the story of the church – in seasons of revival, the Word of God is valued and the preaching of the Word is valued.

- There is a heightened receptivity to the Word of God.
- There is a renewed responsiveness to the Word of God.

“The primary task of the church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God. The decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching had declined.” (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

“What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a Revival? It is renewed *preaching*. Not only a new interest in preaching but a new kind of preaching.” (LJ)

“I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word: otherwise I did nothing.... The Word did it all.” Martin Luther (on the Reformation)

We need to raise up millions of faithful, Christ-centered, people-loving, expositors that expound the Word with accuracy and freshness; we don't need ten more sensational conference speakers who say the same things at different events.

“of the law of Moses” – The Pentateuch; first five books.

How many of you woke up saying, “I want some Leviticus?!”

- “Get the Bible!” Doing the wave!

But notice they’re not “worshipping the Bible.”

- **“that God had commanded Israel”** (1c).
- The want to hear from God. (2 Timothy 3:16)

- Who wrote Romans? **Paul**. Who wrote Romans? **God**.
- **We want the book because the book helps us to see and know and be satisfied in God.**

A. Why do they do this?

1. They believed the power of the Word

You are not going to stand there all day, with 50,000 other people, unless you believe it's God's Word. **Scripture is:** "Living and active" (Heb 4:12)

2. They believed Ezra would proclaim it.

- They knew he worked hard to teach it (**See Ezra 7:10**)

3. The Spirit of God creates a desire for the Word of God in the people of God. (1 Pet 2:1-3)

- One of the signs of regeneration and revival is hunger for Scripture.
- **Illustration: It's Alive!**

Do you desire the Word of God?

If not, maybe you should spend some time in Psalm 119, where the Psalmist spends 176 verses talking about the value of Scripture

- "Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things from your law" (v 18)
- "Your testimonies are my delight, they are my counselors" (24)
- "The law of your mouth is like thousands of gold and silver pieces" (72)
- "Oh how I love your law, it is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97)
- "The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant because I long for your commands" (130-131)
- "I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words" (Ps. 147)

V. 2: Ezra brought the book.

Again, notice, "Ezra" – Who is the book named after? Nehemiah.

What happened to Nehemiah?

- **Nehemiah was an organizer**; administrator; he had kingly gifts as we sometimes say.
- **Ezra has prophetic gifts**; Then you'll have the Levites (ch 10), the priests come along and love and serve the people. The Lord blesses his people with prophets, priests, and kings.

Nehemiah steps aside – "you're the Bible guy."

- **You see men who both love God working with their gifting.**
- Nehemiah didn't say, "**Hey I moved here and sacrificed. Let me preach!**"
- No, he demonstrates humility.

These two books go together in Hebrew; just as these two men go together.

The church needs those who are **administrators** (good at business principles, systems, organizations) and they need **Bible guys**.

Ezra brought the law “before the assembly, men and women, and all who could understand, on the first day of the seventh month” (2)

- That is, everyone who could understand.
- We like having kids here

#2: The People Listen to the Word *Attentively* (8:3)

“Early morning to midday” – that’s five or six hours!

- This is not a cute little “Ted Talk.”
- This is an “Ez talk!”
- That’s a long worship service!!!
- That’s a long sermon! This is every preacher’s favorite verse!

A few years ago, I flew across country to do an event. I got there and we’re going through the order, and they say, “We have you down for 20 minutes.” Why am I flying out for 20 minutes! I can send you a video!

“Attentive” - The word means “eager to learn” – ready to respond and absorb.

- They weren’t distracted.
- You should bring a predetermined commitment to obey the Word as you prepare to read/hear it.
- I’ve seen/heard of people clipping their fingernails; balancing checkbooks, circling the O’s in the bulletin, scrolling through social media, and doing various other things during a sermon.
- I’ll be honest, I have checked out before ... listening not preaching!
 - Recent trip: No cell phone for five days!

Understand that this lack of attentiveness shows that it is not a moment/season of revival.

- Because revival is about being “eager to learn.”
- The every present coughing ceases, and there is a sensitive attentiveness.
 - People stop taking notes, and they start listening, weeping, worshiping, changing.

What hinders attentive listening?

- Anger (James 1:19-21)
- Unbelief
- Distracted Hearts – cares, worries, desires for other things (Mark 4:14-20)
- Hard Hearts – not teachable/chip on shoulder/ life is about other things/no value of the Word/fight to resist the Word

#3: The People Respond to the Word *Expressively* (8:4-6)

V. 4

“Pulpit/platform” (literally **“tower”**)– It dominates the scene. They were ready. They’re expectant. They build something..

Many voices out there tell us, **“Preaching doesn’t work.”**

- **It doesn’t great if you stink at it!!**
- Ezra was undoubtedly *effective*. He was "skilled" and "the hand of god was on him" (Ez 7)
- He was a serious student of Scripture and he walked with God.

Some say, “You shouldn’t have a stage/pulpit, and stand above people.”

- **“Well, I’m small!”**
- But the pulpit probably served not just a practical purpose of raising up up to visibility, but also a spiritual purpose of symbolizing a people **were “under the Word.”**
- Notice **verse 5.**
- **Begg – Scottish Pres churches Beadle...**

4b – Beside Ezra is **a bunch of dudes with weird names**. He’s flanked by 6 dudes on his right seven on his left.

- This is like a **teaching team with Ezra as the captain.**
- They could have been helping him read or interpret, taking it from Hebrew to Aramaic
- Another group of 13 are mentioned in verse 7.

If you’re new to IDC, understand that we **take a team approach.**

This year I think I’m scheduled to teach 65% of the time. I’m not the only teacher.

Verse 5 – “Opened the book... above all the people” –We have a picture of the authority of the Word and the humility of the people.

How We View the Word: Under it; not Over It –

- Many don’t like this because they don’t want to live under authority.
- **“I went to college... I know who Wittgenstein is...”**
- **“It’s chauvinistic; we’ve progressed;”**
- **“The reader determines the meaning...”**
- It’s as old as the garden of Eden when the serpent said, “Did God really say?” The great sin began with a failure to live under the Word of God in humility.

God in heaven, speaks to us on earth, through the Word.

- It’s a gift. It’s a privilege to hear from God.

God is good and wise, and you would be a fool not to listen to His Word.

Isaiah 55 – God’s Word comes down and blesses; it is effectual:

- ¹⁰ “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

It is a great gift to know God through his Word.

- **Do not despise the Bible.**
- **Do not harden your heart toward the Bible.**
- **Get below it.**

“You have exalted above all things, your name and your Word” (Ps 138:2b)

Do you want to hear from God? Then “OPEN THE BOOK!”

- **“Where Scripture speaks, God speaks.” (Augustine)**
- **Do you open it on days other than Sunday?**
- **Do you tell others to “open the book?”**
- **“You don’t know Jesus? Read Luke. Marriage is rough? Ephesians 5. Marriage is boring? Song of Solomon.” (MD)**

Verse 6 – Worship Scenes

It’s interesting, most of these expressions are what we associate with musical worship today; yet, they are responsive to the preaching the Word!

Preaching is an act of worship

- A. “All Stand” (5)**
- B. “Blessed God” (6) – not worshiping the Bible, but God of the Bible. We don’t know how exactly. Perhaps it was a reading of the Psalms. Maybe it was an outburst of praise...**
- C. “Amen” – I’m going to trade some of you in for some Charismatics.**
- **Amen = “Yes. I agree. I need that.”**
 - **“My sheep hear my voice, and they know me,” Jesus says.**
 - **“Someone may think I’m a weird” You are. So I’m I. We’re together.**
- D. “Lifting up their hands” – Ruh rho!**
- a. **Raised for worship (1 Tim 2)**
 - b. **Not to touch your girl friend... Get a wife and you can do both!**
- E. “They bowed their heads, and worshipped with their faces to the ground”**

Now, **I'm not advocated disorderliness**. You know me too well.
I'm advocating responsiveness.

Do you remember the alabaster jar lady?

- In seasons of revival, **how we appear to people is irrelevant.**
- **There is self-forgetfulness.**
- We simply express worship with all we have.

In places where there's a lack of Scripture, the people will come by foot and bike for days and actually **weep when hearing it.**

Perhaps our familiarity has breed apathy.

- We have so many Bibles – translations, study Bibles, **different colors to match your outfit, black, blue, tan, dusty rose, forest green, Lydia purple!**

#4: The People Understand the Word *Rightly* (8:7-8)

Note that six times in this chapter you can find “understanding” mentioned (vv. **2–3, 7–8, 12–13**).

The Bible is not a “magic book. You don't rub it for good luck.
God's Word must be understood for it to change you.

A. “Air war” and “ground war” (public and smaller setting”)

Verse 7 – **A different group of thirteen teachers** (not the ones on the platform with him), apparently stationed among the crowd moves about... helping others these people help others to know the Word.

It is simple Bible exposition.
Explaining and applying the Word.
This is Matthew 28 disciple-making.

This is what changes lives – God's Word.

We need both:

A Good Air War – Preaching, media, books, covers a lot of ground

A Good Ground war – small groups, counseling, classes, etc.

#5: The People Depart from Hearing the Word *Joyfully* (9-12)

To use a Puritan phrase, they wept because they felt the “**experimental power of the Word**”

of God.”

Nehemiah and the other leaders wanted everyone to realize what was going down. Twice they say that the day was “*holy*”

A. There was conviction and grief

They were made aware of their sin, like **Nathan made David aware of his sin.**

They understood God’s Law, **grasping what pleased Him and what did not please Him.**

- They were struck with the realization that **Babylonian captivity was due to their sin.**
- The brokenness of the wall was due to their sin.

The Word should bring conviction.

- **The gospel is *good news* only because there’s really bad news!**

Don’t resist the conviction of God’s Spirit.

- **Welcome it as the beginning of renewal, and repent/change**

My friends, **let the Word convict you of sin.**

But don’t stop there...

Let it strengthen you...

B. Sorrow gave way to joy

There was sorrow because of sin, but joy because of the realization that God was not casting them off.

He was merciful.

Repentance leads to joy.

The leaders told them to stop weeping (8:9-11).

There was **another reason for joy: This particular day was the first day of the seventh month (8:2), a day God made to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets (cf. Lev. 23:23–25).**

- This feast was a sacred time.
- **Trumpets would be played....**

For what purpose?

- **To remind people that nine days later, on the 10th day, the greatest of all feasts was to occur, the Day of Atonement. (though not mentioned in the chapter)**
- The High Priest would take the blood of a sacrifice, walk into the holy of holies, and make atonement for the people He represented.

Feast of Trumpets – was a time of joy because it was heralding, announcing that atonement was around the corner!!

And five days after that, the Feast of Booths began, which reminded people of the joy God gave through his bountiful provision (cf. Lev. 23:33-36; Dt. 16:15).

This was a day of gladness because it launched a season of celebrating God's grace!

So the leaders said to stop crying and start partying (8:10)!

The joy of the lord - our savior, is our strength.

Knowing God and having joy go together.

We have a greater atonement to rejoice in.

Not a symbolic atonement, but an actual atonement!

The law makes us aware of our problem: sin, and we weep; and the gospel brings us the solution: Jesus, and we rejoice!

The Bible tells the story of the real substitute.

It tells the story of sin being forgiven through the death and resurrection of the Lamb of God.

Why is God preserving this people anyway?

He is going to bring the Savior through this people.

You shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

A leader greater than Nehemiah, a teacher greater than Ezra, a priest greater than the priests, would come, our all-Sufficient prophet, priest and King.

The hero of the Bible brings us joy!

We love the Bible because the Bible is about the Messiah.

#6: The People Do the Word Obediently (13-18)

Notice their unqualified obedience.

13-ff: The heads of the family come and say, I know it's hard to teach to 30+ thousand people, so give us a crash course and we'll go teach it.

This is Deut 6

Ponder this:

- 1. Public teaching (Ezra)**

2. **Small groups (levites, 7)**
3. **Homes (13)**

This is a people under the word!

What did they discover their first day of Bible study? (13)

- **They were to live in booths.**
- **This was to commemorate how God brought them out of Egypt and protected them in the wilderness.**
- **They had not practiced it for centuries.**

The Feast of Tabernacles from the fifteenth to the twenty-second day of the month...

The leaders had just a few days available for getting the word out to the Jews in the surrounding villages that everybody was going to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

15ff.

- Notice how they go do it! “as it is written”

16 – They all did it.

17ff – Everyone.

It looked silly to outsiders. But they don't care.

What is the consequence of immediate and unqualified obedience?

“And their joy was very great rejoicing.”

This is what happens when the people of **God obey the Word of God: joy!**

This responsiveness is a great model.

Jesus gives us the greatest model and the power for obedience!

How did Jesus treat the Word of God?

- **Engaging the Teachers of the law when 12 years old.**
- **Temptations** – with the Word he responds.
- **Public Ministry begins** – Stands up to read from Isaiah.... Says its fulfilled
- **All through his ministry there are echoes of the OT**
- **He says things like “Not one jot or tittle shall pass away...”**
- **Matthew** – Jesus is the fulfillment of everything Israel has failed to be.
 - **Baptized, wilderness, ascending the hill like Moses to give the Sermon on the Mount**
 - **“I came to fulfill it!”**

Jesus is the ultimate subject of the Scriptures.

He obeyed perfectly where we failed, and died on our behalf and now empowers us to obey God.

Let's view Scripture like Jesus viewed it, and by his power live it out.

Application

1. Let the Word of God dwell in you richly everyday.

Read Daily – Do you have a plan?

- **Here's mine....**
- **H – Highlight**
- **E – Explain (explain it briefly)**
- **A – Apply it (Make a pithy application)**
- **R – Respond (make some ways to go do it)**

Read/study with others

2. Prepare your heart to hear the Word of God every week in corporate worship

- Read ahead
- Get sleep
- Remove distractions
- **Come expecting to hear from God**

3. Pray for awakened hearts.

Intercession is a key to awakening.

An interesting note about the first great awakening (which peaked in 1740-1742) was that it was preceded by the imprisonments in England. In his biography of George Whitefield, Arnold Dallimore makes a wonderful observation:

Legislation was enacted which distressed the Puritan conscience, and in 1662, on one of the darkest days in all British history, nearly two thousand ministers –all those who would not submit to the Act of Uniformity- were ejected from their livings. Hundreds of these men suffered throughout the rest of their lives, and a number died in prison. Yet these terrible conditions became the occasion of a great volume of prayer; forbidden to preach under threat of severe penalties – as John Bunyan's Bedford imprisonment bore witness- they yet could pray, and only eternity will reveal the relationship between this burden of supplication and the revival that followed.

Revival follows supplication.

One wonders what the relationship is between Nehemiah's prayers in chapter 1, and this revival that followed.

May God make us a people of the book.