

The People and the Word

Nehemiah 7-8

Some of you may recall our study of this passage, when we were snowed out last year — Seth Brown called it “Imago Dei Pajama day.” [Pray]

A. Reformation Introduction

- One of the fundamental convictions of the reformation was **Sola Scriptura** that is, **Scripture is the final rule for faith and practice.**
- **Until he was 20, Martin Luther never saw a Bible!** He saw one in the library in the university and reportedly read the story of Hannah. No one read the Bible in those days!
- But he would be **converted through his own study of Scripture (Romans 1:17).**
- His formal break with **Rome was in July 1519, at Leipzig, where he Debated John Eck**
 - Luther stated that **all church teaching must be normed by the Bible.**
 - All **creeds and councils must be judged by God’s Word.**
- **1521 in Worms** “my **conscience was captive to the Word of God...**”

One might argue that Luther’s greatest contribution was the translation of the Bible into the common language of the people (German).

- **He translated almost all of it in just 11 weeks in the Wartburg castle...**
- Luther wanted common people—the **farm boy and milkmaid**—to understand the Scriptures and delight in them.
- “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.”

Long before Luther led the Germans back to the clear teaching of Scripture, Ezra led returning Jewish exile as back to Scripture. We see this reformation in Nehemiah 8.

This is a powerful chapter about the life giving word of God, reviving the people of God... I pray that the Lord may revive us by His Word today. **Pray**

- **God builds His church by His Word. You can build a crowd on personality, but there’s a difference in a crowd and a church!**
- **In Neh 1-6, the people build the walls, and now the rest of the Book is about the building of the people.**

B. Chapter 7: Repopulation of Jerusalem; Genealogy of Returnees

“The Jerusalem Phonebook”

V 1-2

Gatekeepers, Singers and Levites (responsible for worship)

Hanani – the civil leader

Hananiah – the military commander

Nehemiah selected good men – “faithful and God fearing” and delegated responsibility. Good leaders delegate.

3-4: He gave them specific guidelines and turned them loose.

Lots of People (7:5-73) – A Record of those who Returned from Exile

V 5: Nehemiah continues to follow “what God has put in his heart” by registering the people....

Verses 6-73 are virtually identical to the list in Ezra 2...

- He lists the returned exiles from the time of Zerubbabel.
- In Ezra 2 it is an historical description; in Nehemiah 7, it is an instrument for identifying families from which can be drawn new inhabitants for Jerusalem.
- It's like a checklist.
- **Apparently, Nehemiah wanted to make sure that those repopulating Jerusalem were of pure Jewish ancestry, and the record served to this end.**

1. The Original Leaders (6-7)
2. Laymen (8-38)
3. Priests (39-42)
4. Levites (43)
5. Singers (44)
6. Gatekeepers (45)
7. Temple Servants (46-56)
8. Descendants of the Servants of Solomon (57-60)
9. Those of questionable ancestry (61-65)
10. Totals of people and gifts (66-73)

66-69: The grand total of about **50,000 people!**

73b: This half of the verse is an addition to Ezra 2:70, and it brings the narrative back to Nehemiah's time... **the 7th month is important for the following chapter.**

- It's a festival month, which includes the feast of trumpets, the Day of Atonement, booths, etc.
- It is important for understanding the spiritual renewal that will take place.

C. Chapter 8: Building the People with the Word of God

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

God sent a Revival

Revival is the **intensification** of what God is always doing....saving, healing, forgiving...

Jl Packer says that in chapter 8, “God takes over.”

- He has been in control of everything thus far: the walls are built **in just 52 days** – **“with the help of our God” (6:16)**.
- But now, in ch 8, **God “visits His people” in special way**.
- It’s an **intensification of God’s work**.
- **This holy visitation is revealed in a hunger for the Word of God**.
- We read this passage and we’re lead to say **“Do it again!”**

The People

- Notice the emphasis on the word **“people.”**
- The word **“people”** occurs **13 times** in **8:1-12**; “
- **“all the people”** occurs in **9** of those instances.
- **They are rallying around the Word!**

Looking at their example, let’s be a people who...

#1: Understand the Word (8:1-8)

6 times in this chapter you can find “understanding” mentioned **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**.
- *It requires illumination, God opening our minds to understand:*
 - o **Luke 24:27; 31, 45**, “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...”

A. Understanding Begins with A Hunger (8:1-2)

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

- The whole town is shut down.
- **Can you imagine? “Restaurants: Closed.”**
- **“Where are they?” “They’re listening to Ezra preach for six hours!”**

“As one man” – unity and devotion. Acts 2:42

- Together, **they stand up for 6 hours in the heat! In the Middle East!!!**
- They don’t seem to care! They’re **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 inviting 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!**

Why do they do this?

i. **Because the Spirit of God creates a desire for the Word of God. (1 Pet 2:1-3)**

- One of the signs of regeneration and revival is hunger for Scripture.

- Players - cupped hands, feed me

ii. Because They knew Ezra would teach it! Ezra 7:10

- Ezra was undoubtedly *effective*.
- He was "skilled" and "the hand of god was on him" (Ez 7:9)
- The church is doubly blessed with the Bible, and people who teach it.
- Many young guys I talk to have no idea how hard it is to prepare weekly expositions that are faithful, engaging and effective — week in and week out.
- Ezra worked.
- The study is exhausting, often lonely, and laborious.
- Ministry can be a place where lazy people hide; or it can take the road of Ezra and labor.

In seasons of revival, the Word of God is valued & the preaching of the Word is valued.

- Acts - sermons 19:10 - two years - what good will that do?
- Calvin in Geneva - preached once each day, and twice on Sunday, during the Geneva reformation.
- "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing.... The Word did it all." Martin Luther

V 1b: "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).

- They want to hear from God. (2 Timothy 3:16)
- Who wrote Romans? **Paul**. Who wrote Romans? **God**.
- We want the book because we want to see and know and be satisfied in God.

V. 2: Ezra brought the book.

- Again, notice, "Ezra" – Who is the book named after? Nehemiah.
- Nehemiah was an organizer; administrator; he had kingly gifts as we sometimes say.
- Ezra has teaching gifts. Nehemiah steps aside – "you're the Bible guy."
- A good leader (Nehemiah) knows his limitations. He appreciates others gifts, and deploys them for service. Here, Nehemiah puts the gentle-scholar preacher in front.
- You see men who both love God working with their gifting. And the Levites.
- 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 and they need Bible guys.

2: 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.

- Ability to understand determined who would attend.
- For us, we bring kids in earlier, for various reasons. That's a conviction - it's important that they begin to worship with the believing community.

B. Understanding Requires Attentiveness (8:3)

3b: "Attentive" - The word means "eager to learn" – ready to respond and absorb.

- **They weren't distracted. They were focused.**
- **Sometimes I may feel like the pilot on my plane today - is anyone listening!**
- **It's 6am and everyone is asleep... "ask a teenager they know everything" "we do ask that you remain inside the aircraft at all times"**
- **You shouldn't listen to a sermon like the people on the aircraft at 6am, or like you watch a movie. But in a posture ready to hear.**
- **They aren't putting it "behind their back" (9:26)**

3a: "Early morning to midday" – that's 5 or 6 hours! Every preacher's favorite verse!

- **This is not a cute little "Ted Talk."**
- **This is an "Ez talk!"**

C. Understanding as a Communal Experience (8:4-8)

V. 4: The community builds a "Pulpit/platform" (literally "tower")

- **They were ready. They're expectant.**
- **The pulpit was raised not just for visibility, but to symbolize being "under authority."**
- **Notice verse 5.**
- **Example: Some high churches - climbing up Luther's pulpit (here I stand!)**

4b – A community of teachers.... Beside Ezra is a bunch of dudes with weird names.

- **He's flanked by 6 dudes on his right, and 7 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.**
- **One thing I appreciate at IDC is having a team approach.**
- **Commentaries are also like this group. They aid us in understanding.**

Verse 5 – A submissive community .. "Opened the book... above all the people"

- **Authority of the Word and the humility of the people.**
- **How We View the Word: Under it; not Over It**

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.**

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

The Community in Corporate Worship (6)

The Word is central in the public assembly: 1 Timothy 4:13

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 - it doesn't come *after* worship!

- **"All Stand" (5)**
- **"Blessed God" (6)** – not worshiping the Bible, but God of the Bible. We don't know how exactly. Maybe it was an outburst of praise...
- **"Amen" Amen = "Yes. I agree. I need that."** "My sheep hear my voice, and they know me," Jesus says.
- **"Lifting up their hands"** – Ruh rho!

Notice something: **Ezra had been doing the same thing for 14 years with no extraordinary results!**

- 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 always, even in times when you see little effect.**
- 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!

"They bowed their heads, and worshipped with their faces to the ground"

- **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 produced apathy.**

- We have so many Bibles – translations, study Bibles... apps
- **Different colors to match your outfit: black, blue, tan, dusty rose, forest green, Lydia purple!**
- **Psalms 119:161** - "my heart stands in awe of your words"

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. (V. 9)

V 8: It is simple Bible exposition.

- Explaining and applying the Word.
- This is Matthew 28 disciple-making.
- This is what changes lives – God's Word.

- This is what we're committed to as a church - no gimmicks, no crazy tricks on stage (I'm not wearing yoga pants doing comedy).
- I believe every pastor who labors hard in the study and prayer can deliver the bread of God to the people of God and they will be well fed, and they will grow.
- I want the sermon to be reproducible, and re-studyable.

- New to the Bible? Get some tools Talk to a friend, Pastor....

#2: Rejoice in the Word (8:9-12)

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 the Word lead you to joy...

B. Sorrow gave way to joy

There was sorrow because of sin, but also joy. Why?

(1) The realization that God was not casting them off. He was merciful. (9:17, 19, 27, 31)

- They had grief as they looked back; but gladness at the thought of the future — for in this moment, they were experiencing that God wasn't finished with them. He had restored the city, repopulated it, sent teachers to teach the Word to them.
- The same principle applies today: Grief for sin; joy in God's forgiveness and the assurance of his love, and hope in the future. That's the gospel!
- The God who convicts us of sin is the same God who saves sinners, who trusts in Christ alone for salvation.
- From the Scriptures they learn who God is specifically, what He does, what He says and what He gives.
- They are told to not be sad in self-absorption but to feast in joyous generosity.

(2) This particular day was the first day of the seventh month (8:2), a day God established to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets (cf. Lev. 23:23–25).

- This feast was a **joyful** time. Mourning was out of step. They will weep in chapter 9, but the purpose of this time was to feast, public repentance would happen in three weeks.
- In this particular time, trumpets would be played.... To remind people that nine days later, **on the 10th day of the seventh month, 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.**

The **Feast of Trumpets** **was a *time of joy* because it was announcing that *atonement was around the corner*!!**

- The feast of trumpets **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.**

The Scriptures provided this explanation.

My friends, we have a greater atonement to rejoice in!!!

- **The law makes us aware of our problem: sin, and we weep; and the gospel brings us the solution: Jesus, and we rejoice!**
- **We go to the Bible because we need strength. We find the good news there.**

The Bible tells the story of the true and better sacrifice.

The hero of the Bible brings us joy!

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

- **We need the Bible because we don't know about the Savior without it.**
- **We can know about God generally in creation, but you can't get from sunsets to substitution apart from the Scriptures.**
- **We can go from pinecones to propitiation apart from biblical revelation.**
- **We rejoice in the message of Scripture, or we might, say, in the hero of Scripture.**

Luther: "The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid."

- **The Bible is telling this one great story or redemptive history, pointing us to the Savior.**
- **When we see Him, and know him, and adore Him, we find joy!**
- **"As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." - that's all because of Christ. He's our strength.**

#3: Obey the Word (8:13-18)

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**

1. Public teaching (Ezra 1-6)

2. Small groups (Levites, v. 7)

3. Homes (13)

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

- They were to live in booths (temporary hut structure). 15th day of the seventh month
- This was to commemorate how God brought them out of Egypt and protected them in the wilderness, and provided for them.
- They had not practiced it for centuries.
- They had just a few days available for get ready for it.

15-17

- Notice how they go do it! “as it is written”
- They all did it.
- It looked silly to outsiders. But they don’t care.
- A life pleasing to God involves a life of obedience to his word — not some mystical experience, or some new fad — but obedience to the already-given, totally sufficient Word of God.

17b: What is the consequence of immediate and unqualified obedience?

- “And their joy was very great rejoicing.”
- Chapter 12:43, reformation not only puts word in our hands but songs in our hearts!

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

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 beings – 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!” And that's what we need - we need a Savior.
 - One to live the life we could not live... And one to pay the penalty for our law-breaking.

As amazing as this reformation in Nehemiah 8 was, it was short lived.

Nehemiah ends with the people failing to keep God's law, despite having this revival.

• CHAPTER 13 IS A DISASTER!

• Thus the OT history ends with a longing for someone to keep the law.

- Galatians 4:4 in the fullness of time...
- Jesus obeyed perfectly where we failed, and died on our behalf and now empowers us to obey God, according to the Scriptures.
- The Scriptures point us to the hero of the Bible, the Lord Jesus.
- In him we find life, and through Him we can live to the glory of God alone.
- The joy of Jesus is our strength.

Summary:

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

- The joy we find in the gospel is our strength.
- Go to the Scriptures to see your Savior! To hear from your Father.

2. Let's pray for awakened hearts – in homes, neighborhoods, country, etc – and for real change to take place.

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

3. Let's saturate the nations with the gospel revealed in the Scriptures.