

Nehemiah 8:1-12

The Watergate Affair

Introduction

Well, after finally exhausting his ideas for wacky Church stunts and relevant movie clips, cutting-edge TV, and hockey church skits, local Pastor Jim Auburn from Portland Oregon has resigned himself to *“simply preaching the Gospel...”*

After preaching through every **Marvel and Disney movie** there is; performing over 50 death-defying stunts; the sombre pastor finally admitted he had **nothing left**, and that going forward he would simply stick to the Gospel as revealed in the Old & New Testament...

Sources claim Auburn had been *“scraping the bottom of the barrel”* by preaching through such things like Battlestar Galactica and Buffy the Vampire Slayer **before finally coming** to the end of his rope; and just preaching Christ.

*“I’ve browsed through the entire Netflix catalog and checked all of the upcoming films he says... **There’s just nothing left** ...I guess I’ll just dust off the ol’ Bible and see what’s in there. It’s sad that it’s come to this, but maybe **just maybe**, God may grow my church **even if I don’t launch myself out of a cannon this coming Sunday...***

Babylon Bee

Now if you haven’t picked up by now, this so-called news article is nothing more than Christian humour – it’s completely made-up!

It’s sourced from that **widely loved Christian website** *“The Babylon Bee...”*

Now if you don’t know, the Babylon bee is a website **written by Christians, for Christians** to show the world that Christian **can make fun of themselves...**

It's simply a website to show, that Christians have a sense of humour...

Link to Nehemiah 8

But it does raise an interesting question **and one that I want us to think about** as we come to Nehemiah chapter 8 here today:

What should true & Biblical preaching look like in the gathering of saints? **X2**

Well here in Nehemiah chapter 8, God's Word gives us a perfect example & an answer to what that is!

See here in Nehemiah 8 God's people gather together for a conference – a Bible conference in fact with a **hunger and a zeal** to hear the Word of God **preached & proclaimed** in the city square of Jerusalem!

And It is **through that preaching**, through **that proclamation of the Word** – that the people of God had the joy of knowing Him!

Main Point

And that's actually the main point that I want us to see as come to Nehemiah chapter 8 here today:

In preaching the Bible, the people of God have the joy of knowing Him!

Outline

And we're gonna see this in 2 points:

In verses 1 to 8:

A Passion for the Word of God (1-8)

And in verses 9 to 12:

The Power of the Word of God (9-12)

Nehemiah 8

So, if you have your bibles Nehemiah chapter 8, beginning in verse 1:

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel. ² On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. ³ While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. [And] all the people listened attentively to the book of the law...

Opening Gambit

As **one of the books** of the Old Testament, Nehemiah is to be understood **together with the book of Ezra!**

Ezra a **priest and a scribe** living in the land of Israel, taught the people the word of God!

And during the time of the restoration of Jerusalem when the people are returning home from the **Babylonian Exile**, it is Ezra who attended to the restoration of the community's religious life, and their worship life, and their life in relation to God!

Nehemiah (on the other hand) **had been the royal cupbearer** – a servant to the King Artaxerxes – the militant ruler of the Babylon Empire!

And so together with the help of Ezra, Nehemiah would rise to the level of Governor – he would ask the King permission to return home to the city, in order **to rebuild the city walls** that had been destroyed during the siege of 587 B.C.

Asking if he could help recover the identity of the Covenant people of God...

The city walls are rebuilt – the people begin to return – and **our text informs us** dear friends, that the nation **gathers together on the first day of the seventh month, which according to Jewish history** marks the beginning of the Civil New Year!

A new year, a new beginning, **seems like the perfect time**, to remember the past...

The Watergate

Now there were other gates **inside of the city walls** in Jerusalem – earlier chapters in the book of Nehemiah remind us of:

The **sheep** gate

The **fish** gate

The **valley** gate

The **mustard** gate

The **east** gate

The **dung** gate

But in a time of **national repentance** and **nation-wide revival**:

It is the Watergate that is worth remembering!

The square was a public gathering where both men & women could come together without the **ritual gender separation** required at the Temple...

And being one of the larger gates, it was able to fit **all of the people** gathered together **in the square** that day!

In fact, some commentators have suggested **that this gathering** is somewhere between 30,00-50,000 thousand people gathered in this square...

Extreme lengths

And **almost immediately** verse 1 of our text informs us **of the condition of the people's hearts** after 70 years of exile in Babylon – Nehemiah chapter 8 Verse 1:

*When the seventh month came, and the Israelites had settled **in their own hometowns**...all the people gathered together at the Water Gate...*

So just think about this scene for a moment...

Here they are – **40 plus years** back from captivity – they are finished with the temple – they are finished with the walls – the city has been rebuilt, and these people:

Finally have a moment to rest!

They finally have a chance to sit down & relax in their own hometowns of peace...

And yet, **despite that opportunity for rest & physical satisfaction of comfort** verse 1 informs us **that they got up early in the morning** to hear the Word of God preached...

No doubt they would have been **hungry**, no doubt they would have been **tired**, no doubt they would have been **restless, & exhausted...Young children** to carry...

And yet despite all of these factors that would have prohibited us **in our 21st century Christianity...**

These people gathered together that day...

They had a hunger for the Word of God!

And they were willing to go to incredible lengths **to get it!**

And so, the first observation that I want us to see as we come to Nehemiah chapter 8 here this morning is a lesson **that we so often forget but must always seek to remember:**

Physical **needs**, and physical **satisfaction ARE NOT ENOUGH FOR US** in the Christian life!

It's **not enough** that we have a **nice house** – it's not enough that we have a **nice car** – it's **not enough** that we have a **nice marriage** – or nice things...

We need **spiritual food** and **spiritual satisfaction** that **only the Word of God** can give!

We need more than **just physical stuff** in the Christian life!

And we know this!

We still try

Ahh but here's the trick...

Even though we know this...

We still try to obtain it don't we!

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by golly **we sure try don't we!!!**

Still yearning for that house – still yearning for that child – still yearning for that job – still yearning for that spouse...

Thinking that *that is the thing that will finally satisfy that quench* – yet **all the while knowing full well** that our hearts are drifting **further and further** away from Christ...

And these people knew that!

They knew that the city walls, and the city temple, **were NOT enough** for them to be satisfied!

And **so they got up early**, to hear the only thing that would satisfy their souls...

They needed God's Word!

They wanted God's Word!

Preaching from the Bible

And **we know this** because Nehemiah **now goes on to tell us in verse 1 what we ought to remember** in those times of need:

[And] they asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel. ² [And] on the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law of God before the people...

They **wanted** the law!

They **needed** the Law!

The Law is another way to describe the first 5 books of the Bible...

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy!

In other words:

They **didn't just come** to hear the opinions of men – and they **didn't just come** to hear **a list of laws!**

But **they wanted to hear the story!**

Stories of Abraham & Isaac, Jacob & Joseph!

Hagar and Ishmael, Rachael & Leah!

Stories of the Red Sea!

Stories of Moses!

Stories of Pharaoh and the Exodus!

This was more than just a list of rules for them to follow:

This was their past!

This was their identity!

This was **the covenant making, covenant keeping** God who **rescues and redeems** rebel sinners to Himself!

This was the story of Redemption being read **in & amongst** the people of God...

And **this was the foundation** upon which Ezra preached the Word!

Preaching is to be from the Bible

Observation **number #2** and **the second thing** that I want us to see as we come to Nehemiah chapter 8:

Preaching is to be from the Bible!

Preaching is to be **founded and built upon** the Bible!

These people **would NOT settle** for the opinions of men!

They **wouldn't settle** for the performance of men!

They **wouldn't settle** for the stories of men!

But they needed divine revelation – from a divine revealing God!

It was the Word that they desired!

It was the Word that heled their attention!

It was the Word – the Word – the Word!

This is why **I am so glad** that I **don't** have to get up here on a Sunday morning to try and hold your attention!

I trust **the Word to hold your attention**, and watch the Spirit of God do His thing!

6 hours

In fact, **so confident of the Word** was Ezra – that **I want you to notice how long** he read from the Book of the Law – Verse 3:

*And while he [Ezra] was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it **from daybreak until noon** before all the people...*

From daybreak until noon... All the people listened attentively to the book of the Law...

So, this was roughly about 6 hours long!

6-hour sermon **devoted entirely** to preaching the Bible!

Now we preach for 45 minutes here at Grace – sometimes **it feels like 6 hours**, but it's generally around the 45 minutes mark, in air-conditioning, while we are seated, in comfortable pews...

6 hour sermon...45 minutes...

Standing in the sun... air-conditioned pews...

Time in God's Word

Now I say that **not to name and shame** those of you who get bored after 5 minutes of preaching here on a Sunday – but I say that **to point us toward** something **much more profound** than **just their ability** to listen attentively to God's Word!

And that lesson is this:

That when it comes to growing in our knowledge of God & the knowledge of the Scriptures:

You & I need time to let the Word sink into our hearts...over hours, and days, and weeks, and months, and sometimes **even years...**

That there is no quick fix when it comes to knowing the Bible friends!

There is no easy route in the Christian life for Scripture!

There is **no super-charged method**, there is no easy road!

Friends:

God's Word **takes time!**

God's Word **takes energy!**

God's Word **takes effort!**

Hallmarks of Faith

But here's the point I want us to see:

How we spend our time **often tells us** more about our own hearts than any other activity **we do in the Christian life!**

And friends time in God's Word **is one of the hallmarks** of the Christian faith...

That's observation number #3:

*How we spend our time **often tells us** more about our own hearts than any other activity – and time in God's Word **is one of the hallmarks** of the Christian faith...*

Suffering leads us to God

But **that's not even** the most profound aspect we see in Nehemiah 8 – the **most profound aspect** that we see **here in verse 3**, is **found in the fact** that **this is a hunger for the Word of God** actually comes **directly after** their exile & captivity in Babylon...

In other words:

This hunger for the Word of God doesn't **come in a time when they are doing spiritually well, but it comes right after their suffering** & pain in exile...

See:

Sometimes brothers & sisters **God will use even the worst situations of your life** to drive you back to His Word!

Sometimes God can use suffering **to drive us back to the Gospel** & the truth of the Christ centred Scriptures...

The Word of God **should thrill your hearts** when we are in dark places!

And maybe – **just maybe** that current trial that God is leading you through **in this season** of life – and is **not** a careless God, dropping the ball and being a negligent father – but maybe that trial in your life is **God's gracious hand** of calling you back to Himself!

Friends:

How have you used 2020 to grow in your knowledge of the Word?!?!

Friends, how have you used **COVID-19** to grow in your knowledge of the Scriptures?!?!

If this year has taught us **anything that we are to remember** dear friends – it is that:

Suffering **does NOT lead us away from God**, but it must lead us **closer to God!**

And in the beautiful words of the Prince of Preachers Charles Spurgeon:

I have learned to kiss the waves that throw me against the Rock of Ages!

And I would humbly implore you that come 2020, 2021, 2022, **and on into the future...**

Friends **kiss those waves** – draw that hope – feast on that Word!

These people hungered for the Word of God!!!

All People

Fourthly:

Notice the people that were **present that day** hungering for that Word!

We are told explicitly in **verse 2** and **then again in verse 3** that there were both **men, women, and children** present in this gathering!

That it's **not just the men** who needed to hear the Word of God preached – Women needed to hear God's Word too!

And children **needed to hear God's Word too!**

All who had understanding were present in this gathering!

Observation number #4:

Preaching is for all ages! **X2**

See one of the things I love about **our church here at Grace**, is the emphasis we place upon **all people** (both young & old) knowing, and hearing, and understanding the Word of God preached!

It's why we have mixed services!

I don't know if you know this but there is no:

Old people – Young people service here at Grace!

We don't want to create **that kind of a culture** where old people go to the 8:30, young people to the 10:30 – but we actually mix services because we want all ages to know and to hear the Word of God preached!

Places to Serve

It's why we have so many different places for you to serve in at Church!

That there are **Sunday school teachers** who give up their time, energy, and patience to teach our children about the Gospel!

That there are **Mum's** gathering in this church to study the Scriptures on a Tuesday morning...

That there are **men** singing hymns together in the back hall on a Wednesday night...

Kids gathering in small groups & discussions about community gardens and how pickles can teach us **about the glory of God!**

Because we believe that the Bible is a book **not just for all people**, but for all ages!

Both young & old, men and women!

The Bible is for **all people!**

And this becomes **even more evident** as we go down to read verses 7 & 8 where Ezra tells us a whole bunch of names that **I'm not gonna read:**

Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, who were Levites that explained the law to the people...

*And they read out of the book of the law of God, **translating and giving the meaning** [of the text] so that the people **could understand** what was read....*

Now part of their job **may well have** been to translate the Scriptures that were written from Hebrew **into Aramaic** as that was the language that **most of them would have learned** during their time in Exile!

And so they begin to go around to the various ages of people not just to translate the text, but show **the meaning of the text that was read out amongst them from the Scribe Ezra!**

Not all Scripture is easy

And there are several points **that I think are worth noting** in verses 7 & 8:

1. Firstly, this demonstrates that **NOT all of Scripture is easy to understand!**

That even these Israelites **immersed in these Scriptures** needed help in understanding God's Word!

If you've ever read a portion of Scripture and wondered to yourself:

What in the world is God trying to teach me in this text...

Then you need to take heart & know that **you're not alone!**

I always think of Peter in 2nd Peter 3:16 when he speaks about the fact that there are **some things in Paul** that are hard to understand!

Now I don't know about you but **that brings me great comfort** to know that **even Peter** (an Apostle of Jesus) struggled to understand Scripture!

And if Peter (one of Christ's own Disciples) struggled to understand the Word... **then I'm doing okay!**

And so if you're here this morning friends, **and you get frustrated and upset** like myself, that you don't understand a portion of God's Word then you need to remember Nehemiah chapter 8:

God's Word **takes time to set into our hearts** over the long haul!

As we said over days, and months, and sometimes even years!

But secondly, we must remember that:

NOT all of Scripture is easy to understand – and it's okay that we don't get it the first time!

The pressure of husbands

You know sometimes I think that husbands just have this Messiah mentality, that they want to be **the bible answer man** when it comes to knowing Scripture – that **they have to have** every answer to every question their wife & kids ask!

When in reality sometimes the best answer we can to our friends and our family is:

I don't know...

And if we're uncomfortable with saying the words "*I don't know...*", then it makes **all the times that we do say something, suspect!**

And the reality is friends that:

Sometimes Scripture is hard to get! X2

NOT all of Scripture is easy for us to understand – and **that's okay...**

The preacher needs help

But secondly, I think this also demonstrates that:

It's not just the preacher who has a job to do on a Sunday morning at Church!

That sometimes:

Even the preacher needs help in explaining the text!

See even though Ezra was a priest and scribe living in the land of Israel – he still had **helpers on the stage** that were able to go down amongst the people, and help them to get a sense of the Word!

That even pastors need **members** to help explain God's Word!

We all have a job to do

Because as Christians **we don't just want** to understand God's Word ourselves – we want **others in the Church** to know & understand God's word as well!

And **it should bring us great joy** when you & I have the opportunity in our **homegroups**, in our **grace groups**, in our **YAG groups**, and even in our conversations after Church to help others understand the Word!

What a wonderful privilege it is to be able to do that!

Romans chapter 15 verse 14:

*My brothers and sisters, I myself am convinced about you that you are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, **and able to instruct one another!***

Paul knew that it was the job of **every single Christian** to teach and to proclaim Scripture & God's Word to one another!

And so **maybe you're not the person** in this pulpit on a Sunday morning declaring the Law of God, but **maybe you're the one** who will **go around after the service** to help others get a sense of the Word!

To help others get a sense of:

What the heck Pastor Rhoi was talking about in Nehemiah chapter 8!

Maybe you can go up to someone **after this service** and simply ask them:

What did you learn about God today?

What did you learn about Scripture today?

What did you learn about preaching today?

Friends these **simple questions** could be the difference between your brothers & sisters **knowing the Word of God** and **NOT knowing the Word of God!**

In them **having the joy of the Lord** and **NOT having** the joy of the Lord!

This is the passion that these people had for the Word of God – they were **willing to stand around** for hours on end to:

Hear the Word

Explain the word

Describe the Word

And apply the Word

To their friends and their family, their colleagues and their children, **who were all present that day!**

The bible is a book for all people!

The Power of God's Word

Secondly, I want you to notice what happens when **all of these factors** come together in a service!

I want you to notice what happens when the **Scripture is read** – when the **people are gathered** – when the **Word is proclaimed** – and the **meaning made clear** – notice the joy that these people had in knowing:

The Word of God & the God of the Word!

And that leads us into our 2nd point here today:

The Power of God's Word X2

Have a look with me at verse 9:

*Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our LORD. Do not grieve, **because the joy of the Lord is your strength.**"¹¹ And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, since today is holy. Don't grieve."¹² Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, **because they had understood the words that were explained to them...***

Convict

Now there are so many things I wish we could draw from this second point of application; but **I simply wish** to give us **2** things that we can take away from verses 9 to 12 that I think are beneficial for us to see!

Firstly – I want you to notice *the power of God's Word* and its ability to **wound the heart of sinners** – verse 9:

For all the people were weeping [that day] as they heard the words of the law...

The first genuine sign of true & **biblical preaching** is that:

God's Word should always aim to lead us toward a conviction of our sin...

Because:

Conviction of sin is the beginning of true & genuine repentance...

Hebrews 4:12:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, able to discern the thoughts and intentions of men!

They felt the Word of God **piercing their hearts** to the point of tears!

Because:

Conviction of sin is the beginning of true & genuine repentance

In the words of one pastor and theologian:

*The Bible does not just reveal **God to us** – but also **reveals us to God!** It doesn't just show us what **God is like** – but it **also shows us what we are like...**and it demonstrates that God's **Word & His law** must always wound us before Christ & His gospel can heal us!*

See if we don't realize how sick we truly are, then **we we're not gonna see our need** for Saviour!

Comfort

But secondly:

*Notice the Word's ability to **heal the heart of the people!***

God's Word **doesn't just convict the weary** – but it **comforts the wounded!**

Verse 10:

*Then he said to them, “Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our LORD. [and] do not grieve, because **the joy of the Lord is your strength!**”*

Ezra now informs the people that:

Today is a day that is set apart & holy to the LORD our God!

And **because of the holiness of this day, and the Great News that is brought** through the proclamation of a feast:

They must go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, in order to celebrate the joy of the LORD as their strength!

In other words, Ezra says to all the people:

*Look I know you’re mourning...I know you’re hurting...I know you’re aware of your sin – **but you can go home rejoicing this day** because today is a day that is set apart & holy to the LORD our God – there is a feast that you must go home to celebrate **in the joy of the LORD!***

Now **the language he uses here** seems to indicate that this is a reference to what is called:

The feast of Trumpets X2

It’s described in Leviticus chapter 23 in this way:

*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, **in the seventh month, on the first day of the month**, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy gathering...and you shall present a food offering to the LORD...*

And **at the core of the Feast of Trumpets** was preparation for the Day of Atonement – and **right at the heart** of the Day of Atonement was the idea that:

There will be an offer for the people's sin!

A Lamb will be slaughtered on behalf of all the people...

That the LORD will not count their guilt & sin that they have committed toward Him, but He will lay their sin, on the head of another, in order to forgive all of their unrighteousness and make them clean in His sight...

And of course we know that given the language of the New Testament – that this is a **reference and a shadowing** to the death of Christ on the cross:

That God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God!

And so this is the last observation that I want us to see **as we come to a close** here in Nehemiah chapter 8 – friends:

*True and biblical preaching **will always aim to point us** toward the Person & Work of Christ! X2*

This is where all true & biblical preaching ends!

It's **not enough** that we give **good exposition** of the Word!

It's **not enough** that we give good **application** of the Word!

It's **not enough** that we **obtain a sense or a meaning of our sin** before a just & holy God!

We need the remedy of Christ!!!

We need the Gospel **to come and penetrate our hearts** in order to bring joy & healing to the nations!

And that's exactly what the Word of God does for us doesn't it!

*The Word **must always** wound and weaken us with the Law, so that it can **help & heal** us with the Gospel!*

And if our preaching and our teaching **does NOT draw us** more into the image & likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ then we have **failed to achieve** true & biblical preaching!

In the words of Charles Spurgeon **once again** he says:

*A sermon without Christ is like bread without flour. If there is no Christ in your sermon... go home, and **never preach again** until you have something worth preaching...*

Every aspect of Scripture should point us to Christ!

And every aspect of Scripture should point us **toward the knowledge of Christ!**

Because:

In preaching the Bible, the people of God have the joy of knowing Him!

And that's where our passage ends this morning, in the joy & knowledge of the LORD – Verse 12:

Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them...

Joy in Christ is one of **the great evidences** that the Gospel **has won our hearts!**

And so as we come to the close of the year of COVID-19, **and on into 2021 friends:**

How are you growing in God?

How are you growing in your knowledge of the Scriptures?

What is your plan to grow in your knowledge of the Gospel and the joy of the LORD in 2021?

Friends whatever happens in the next 5, 10, **or 50 years to come** – I want you to always remember **that it is:**

Through the preaching, the teaching, the knowing & explaining of the Christ centred Scriptures – that God **will faithfully grow** His Church, convict people of their sin, and bring the joy & knowledge of the Christ-centred Scriptures!

And that is something **that is worth praising God** for!

Let's Pray.