

Nehemiah 7:73b-8:18 | David Baumgartner

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[0 : 00] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church, Knowing Jesus, Making Jesus Known. We are in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah.

If you were to ask, what is that book about, what would most people say? It's about rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Well, if that's so, our last passage in Nehemiah ended with a very important milestone.

It's from chapter 6, verse 15. Let me read it for you. I believe it's in your handout as well. Chapter 6, verse 15 says, The wall was completed on the 25th of the month of Elo, in 52 days.

This tells us that in spite of all the opposition against them, the Jews completed the wall around Jerusalem. Praise God for doing that.

And they did it in 52 days. That's great. This is a major accomplishment. It's the reason for which Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in the first place.

[1 : 12] Not only that, if you look with me, Nehemiah adds in verse 16, And it came about when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence.

For they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. Isn't that great? This has been Nehemiah's perspective all along.

His confidence was in God. When Nehemiah went before King Artaxerxes in chapter 2, verse 8, he said, The good hand of God was upon me.

When the mockers hurled threats against the Jews, in chapter 2, verse 20, he said, God will give us success. And then when the Jews were actually being physically threatened, he said in chapter 4, verse 20, Our God will fight for us.

Isn't that amazing? Now here, I'm going to say this. If this is your perspective on life, how does that affect the way you live? Yeah, it's a good question, isn't it?

[2 : 26] It ought to give you confidence. This morning, I would like for us to skip ahead to chapter 8. And we're going to look in chapter 8, verse 1. Chapter 7 is mainly about a census that they take.

And it determines who's going to be able to move into Jerusalem. But we're going to look at that later. In chapter 8, we're going to have this rare look at Israel.

I would say that this is Israel at its best. And our passage is filled with amazing things to see. Please read with me.

Nehemiah chapter 8. And I'm only going to read the first three verses. 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. 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 : 39] And 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. Heavenly Father, we have gathered here, Lord, to worship you and to learn more and more about you, Lord, because you are wonderful.

You are awesome. Lord, and in you we find eternal life. Thank you, Lord, for just that we have this opportunity to look at your holy word.

Lord, we would ask through the power of your spirit, Lord, that you would reveal to us wonderful things, Lord. Show those things to us. In the precious name of Jesus, I pray.

Amen. Follow along with me here, if you have your Bibles or your iPhones. Verse 1, notice here, the people are gathered in this large area in front of the water gate.

[4 : 43] We're told here, notice this, that they are gathered as one man. Now, that's a Hebraic expression, and it actually occurs nine times in the Old Testament.

Here's what it means. It means that they're unified, down to every single person. And I want to ask you, how often have we seen this?

It's good, isn't it? Verse 1 continues, it says they asked Ezra, the scribe, to bring the book of the law of Moses. Now, this is the first time that Ezra's name is mentioned in the book of Nehemiah.

Ezra, as you know, was a scribe. He was a historian. And he wrote about those first 80 years when King Cyrus gave his decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland.

We also know that Ezra knew a lot about God's word. Back in Ezra, chapter 7, verse 10, let me just read this to you. It says, speaking of Ezra, that he had set his heart to study the law of God and to practice it and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel.

[6 : 01] So that's a little bit about Ezra that we learn. But the main point to notice here is that the people of Israel wanted to hear the word of God.

And so verse 3 tells us that they invited Ezra. Ezra came up and he read from the Old Testament. And it says, from early morning until midday.

Did you catch that? Yeah. Boy, that's a long service. And it says that the people were attentive. It's amazing.

I said we're going to see some amazing things in this passage. Verse 4 adds a few more details. It says, Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for this purpose.

I think this may suggest here that perhaps they intended for the reading of the word to be a regular practice. But let me go on. Then we see these 13 Levites who are named.

[7 : 02] And they're standing next to Ezra on either side. Verse 5 says that he opened the book in the sight of all the people. Boy, there's some suspense building up here.

And when he opened it, all the people stood up. Verse 6, when then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, while lifting their hands.

And then they bowed low, and they worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. In verse 7, 13 more Levites are named who explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place.

The ESV version says that these 13 Levites helped the people to understand the law. And so, in addition to the reading of the word, we now see that the word is being explained.

I'd like to just pause here for a moment. I think it's very interesting that several commentators see this passage as a model for the New Testament church service.

[8 : 19] You ever heard that? Well, let's see. Let's put that to a test. Verse 1 says, all the people were gathered. Well, we're gathered today.

The writer of Hebrews in chapter 10 says, let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembly together as the habit of some, but encouraging one another all the more as you see the day approaching.

So there's one. How about two? Notice, in verse 4, there's a wooden podium that was built for the occasion. Well, yeah, we got one of those here.

In fact, I would say that most churches have some kind of podium. In large cathedrals, you may have seen pictures of these where you have to walk up these stairs to get to it.

You might need an elevator to get up to a podium that high. Verse 3, it says that God's word was being read aloud. Okay, three out of three.

[9 : 26] Paul told Timothy in his first letter, until I come, he says, give attention to the public reading of the scripture, to exhortation and teaching.

three out of three. How about four? Verse 7, God's word is being explained. Okay. He said to Timothy, Paul said to Timothy in his second letter, the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men who are able to teach others also.

Four out of four. How about the fifth one? Ezra read from early morning until midday and all the people were attentive. Great.

Great laugh. So I would say four out of five. You know, this is, that's not going to happen today, friends, is it? A long, you know, we just changed our Sunday service schedule as most of you hopefully know by now.

Nobody suggested a six-hour service. I don't know why, but it just didn't happen. Here I came across this poem. Now I lay me down to sleep.

[10 : 42] The sermon's long, the subject deep. If he gets through before I wake, someone give me a gentle shake. Here's another one.

One day this minister asked this little boy why we serve coffee during our fellowship time. And he says, it's to get the people awake when they drive home. Or how about this one?

There was this seven little boy, seven-year-old little boy sitting in church with his parents and he noticed that there was this white flag with gold stars on it.

And so he says, he asked, Daddy, what's that? And so he said, the father said, well, that's a reminder for all those who died in service. And so the little boy said, well, did they die at the nine o'clock or eleven o'clock service?

Oh, that's funny. Yeah, verse three, they read from early morning until midday and all the people were attentive.

[11 : 46] I want to ask, how did that happen? What happened? I can think of only one condition where this would happen today and that's because there's something very special going on.

In fact, I would say it's going on inside. Let me give you a clue. Look at the end of verse nine. It says, for all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.

Friends, can you imagine that? Hundreds, maybe thousands of people standing there listening to the word of God and they're weeping.

What did that look like? Why are they weeping? I believe that with the completion of the wall along with the ministry of God's word, I believe that it reminded them of just how far as a nation they had strayed from God.

They had been unfaithful to God. They had been disobedient to his word. And so as God promised, what happened? He disciplined them.

[13 : 09] He did that, the Lord did that by sending Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians to come and invade their lands. They, the city, the temple wall, the temple and the city walls were destroyed and the people are taken captive by force.

And think about that. Family members being separated from each other and being taken to a foreign land. That's the price of disobedience.

That's the cost of sin in our lives when we repeatedly don't listen to the Lord. There's a, Paul says in Galatians, do not be deceived.

God is not mocked for whatever a man sows, he shall also reap. So, hearing the word of God, I believe, it brought conviction to their hearts.

Weakness, remorse. But friends, that's not the end of their story because God didn't abandon them. He restored them just like he promised.

[14 : 18] In verse 9, we read that both Nehemiah and Ezra together tell the people, don't weep because this day is holy. verse 10, it says that Ezra, I believe, said to them, go, eat the fat, drink 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. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

God wants his children to be happy, to be content. But in him, not in ourselves, but in him.

And all the people, it says, went home and celebrated. And notice, why did they celebrate? Here's a key verse here. Look with me, verse 12. And all the people went away.

Here's why. Because they understood the words which had been made known to them. And then notice verse 13. The next day, they come back for more.

[15 : 29] It says that on the second day, the heads of the fathers, the households of all the people, the priests and the Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain some more insight into the words of the law.

And then after that, the next day, verse 14, says that 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.

Wow. So they, verse 15, so they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem. And it says, verse 17, that the entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity, friends, that's thousands of people, made booths and lived in them.

And 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. How amazing, friends.

Wouldn't it be great to have been there? How amazing that is. What do we see here? I believe that we see the ministry of God's Word in action.

[16:49] And there's just three things that I want to talk about here, about the ministry of God's Word. Follow along with me. The Word of God, first, it convicts. Notice here that the Jews wanted to hear from God's Word.

And that hearing of the Word, I believe, it brought conviction to their souls. Friends, God's Word wounds us. And it's good.

It's a good wound. It identifies sin. That sin that separates us. It separates you and I. It separates us from a holy God.

And in a sense, we come here to this building to be wounded. Not by each other, but by God Himself. It's because we need to be reminded we need a Savior.

We need one. There's a saying, and maybe you've heard this before, that we need the gospel every day. Have you heard that? Friends, that is true. That is a true statement.

[17:59] The writer of Hebrews says, speaking of the Word, the Word of God is living and it's active and it's sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and the spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and the intentions of the heart.

That's what the Word does. Now, you may have noticed here that they're reading in the law. What's the purpose of the law? It shows our need for a Savior.

That's what it does. Paul says in his letter to Romans in chapter 3, through the law comes knowledge of sin. In other words, the law points to God's righteous demands which any reasonable person ought to say, I don't measure up.

I don't. I have a problem. It's not the law's fault. The problem is with me. The problem is with you. The problem is that we are sinners. And the law just reveals how sinful we are. Paul would say, go on to say in Romans 7, that the law is holy, that the commandment is good, and that it's righteous and good.

[19:27] Well, maybe you've come across Psalm 119. We don't know if King David wrote this, but listen to these words. Speaking of the law, Psalm 119, verse 18, open my eyes, the psalmist says, that I may behold wonderful things from thy law.

Verse 72, the law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. Verse 97, oh, how I love the law.

It is my meditation day and night. God. The law shows us where we're at. It shows us that we're sinners.

But David, King David, would also write this in Psalm 32. Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven. His sin is covered.

Which leads us to the second point. The word of God reveals. There's a reason why we call the gospel good news.

[20:34] It's good news. It's the remedy. It's because we can place our faith in the one who kept the law perfectly. He fulfilled it.

He completed the law. And all of scripture we find is about that one thing. It's about Jesus. It's about salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

In the Old Testament they looked forward to Messiah. We look backward to Jesus. Paul would say in Romans 15 whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction that through perseverance and encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

Friend, do you know anybody who needs hope today? Show them the word of God. We here at Bethel we declare that all believers need the word of God.

The word tells us about God. The word tells us about ourselves. The word tells us of the remedy that's needed to bring about reconciliation between sinners and God.

[21:58] And so come to church hungry for the word. Come with a sense of anticipation. Maybe I just ask you picture right now a Thanksgiving dinner.

Yep, just picture it. And Wally, that'll be easy for you brother. Turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, apple pie. Now here's a question.

What do you need to enjoy all of this? You need to be hungry. Yeah, you need someone to cook it, right? But you also need to be hungry.

You need to be hungry. Come to dinner hungry. Come with an empty stomach. Paul would write again to Timothy in his second letter from childhood.

Listen to what he said. You have known the sacred writings. That's the Old Testament. You have known the sacred writings which are able to give you wisdom that does what?

[22 : 58] It leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. He goes on to say all scripture is inspired by God. It's profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be equipped, may be adequate, and equipped for every good work.

So the word of God, it reveals, first it convicts, it reveals, thirdly, and lastly, the word of God saves. Saves us. I want to ask you this. Suppose you have a friend who has cancer. And suppose you learned that your friend is going to a physician who's a quack, and he's a quack because he dilutes his chemotherapy with sugar water.

And you find this out, and so you go to your friend, and you ask him about this, and this is what he says, I know that my doctor's treatments are worthless, but I go anyway.

And here's why. He's got a great waiting room. He has a beautiful aquarium, a fully equipped TV with surround sound, and he's got really comfortable chairs.

[24 : 28] What would you say to that? You would say, that's totally absurd. But did you know that I've just described many churches today?

I have. I'm talking here about churches that have eliminated God's word, and they've substituted it with things that are comfortable.

Nice aquariums, book reviews, discussion groups, dances. Yeah. Now, I believe there's a legitimate need for people in a church to enjoy a sense of belonging.

You may hear it referred to experience community. Friends, I am all for that. And many churches do a great job with this. Book clubs, dinners, dances, concerts, adventure tours.

Maybe we at Bethel ought to start a new ministry team. Yeah, call it the fellowship team. Friends, those are good things. But what if you heard that that's all they did?

[25 : 41] They did not look at God's word, but instead only had social events. Friends, we believe in these foundational truths.

one, there is a God. Secondly, he gave us his word. He has and continues to speak to us through his word.

And he didn't give us his word to entertain us. He didn't give it so that we could feel noble about ourselves. He didn't give it to us just to inform us.

He gave us his word to transform us. And the message of the word is that there's sin. There's a price that's paid. There's a cost.

But our Lord is gracious and forgiving. And through the grace of Jesus Christ, we can be reconciled to God. Paul says in Romans chapter five again, the law came in that transgression might increase, but where sin increased, grace abounded even more.

[27 : 00] What happens when a society rejects God's word? Ask those living in the state of New York right now. They have where infanticide is now legal in the entire state.

Do you know that? That's what's going on. And those notions are spreading all around our country. And I just want to ask this question, how did that happen?

You can go into any corner of this city and find a bookstore with a Bible. You can listen to good Bible teaching on the radio. You can listen to it, you can hear it on the internet.

What happened? Where is the word of God in New York state? Where is it in Missouri? Makes you wonder.

Faith comes by hearing. Hearing what? Hearing the word of God, the word of Christ. But God's given us his remedy, his word.

[28 : 08] Amen to that. Amen that we can live by that. I want to invite the musicians to come back up. As we see here, we have this rare look at Israel.

All cylinders are firing. I really like that. And I think that it's attributable to them seeing that God is faithful to all of his promises.

Not only for discipline of those he loves, but also he will restore them. He will restore the hearts of those who are humble.

And he uses his word to accomplish his purposes. There's a verse here in Isaiah. It says that so shall my word be which goes forth from my mouth, and it shall not return to me empty without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

Friend, we need God's word. we need to take it seriously. I heard a story where there was this U.S. Army officer, and he was describing his experience as being in charge of the artillery school at Fort Sill in Oklahoma.

[29 : 31] He was writing about in 1958 to 1960. He said that the attitude of the soldiers that were there to learn was so poor and pathetic.

They were so lax and disinterested in the teaching that they often fell asleep during the lectures. But in 1965, just five years later, that all changed.

You know what happened? They had the same instructors, they had the same materials, the same lectures, but all of them were alert and taking notes because the Vietnam War had started.

And now all of a sudden, they took the teaching seriously because of a war. The Bible isn't taken seriously today by many Christians.

If we saw ourselves as being at war, maybe we would. It convicts, it reveals, it saves, believers.

[30 : 38] The last verse I'll read here is out of James chapter one. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

Prove yourselves to be doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you once again for just this precious book that we have.

Your word, Lord. Your word to us. And through it, Lord, we find so many things. But most gladly, Lord, we see Jesus reveal to us.

us. We see, Lord, the character of a God who loves us, a God who doesn't want to see anyone perish, but to live in an everlasting relationship with you.

[31 : 45] We see how Jesus, the Lamb of God, paid the price for our sin. And we see that through our faith in him, by receiving what he did, we see that we can be reconciled to you forever with promises to live with you in your kingdom, with you, Lord.

We thank you for that. Oh, Lord, let us be a church that proclaims your word, that lives by your word. And we thank you, Lord, for it.

Give us the strength, Lord, to serve you. And, Lord, we have this short glimpse of the people in Israel, in Jerusalem, that things are going well for them.

Keep us humble, Lord, that we would walk in your ways. Thank you for this. Thank you for this. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.