

Restoration Begins – Nehemiah 8:1-18

Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 7:73b-8:8

Introduction

From reading the Bible, we know that ever since God delivered his Law to Moses, God's people have gone through times when they tended to neglect God's Word and, as a result, their spiritual condition would decline, and they would suffer

It happened over and over again in a cyclical pattern through the centuries recorded in the pages of God's Word

And we see that same cycle continue throughout Church history as God's people have gone through periods where their love of God's Word and attention to it has waned and the church struggled spiritually as a result

Neglect of the Bible is like a cancer for God's people, and as we look around ourselves today, we see its effects in many denominations and churches all across our nation and around the world

We live in a time of great confusion within the hearts and minds of many believers and their church leaders as we are being assaulted from all sides by unbiblical ideas and teachings – ideas and teachings that are, sadly, making inroads into many churches

Ideas like post-modernism that insists the only universal truth is that truth cannot be objective and universal, and everyone is free to determine what is true for themselves

That has led to a kind of mass-psychosis or delusion where we are expected to ignore things like basic biological fact in favor of supporting, celebrating, and even encouraging what amounts to delusion or mental illness in people

As Ray Davies of the Kinks put it – “Girls will be boys and boys will be girls; it's a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world...”

Today, Christ-followers are facing the new challenge of sorting through what to think and how to react to the Marxist idea of Critical Race Theory and what it all means – and many aren't doing exceptionally well in doing so

All because of the neglect of God's Word and the divine truth it contains – Proverbs 29:18

But, there is good news

The pages of Scripture and the annals of church history show us that God is gracious and he sends renewal and restoration to his people, and the number one trait of renewal is a renewed love for and emphasis on God's Word

Still, change is hard, and most people instinctively tend to resist it even when the change is a good one

It's strange how, even when we recognize the need for change and may desire change, we still struggle with it

I believe that's because we tend to equate change with loss – loss of the status quo, the familiar, and even things that we may really not like that are a part of the status quo that makes them somehow “comfortable” in their own way

We see the need, but we fear the differences we haven't yet experienced

Last week we looked at the pivotal section of Nehemiah, where the focus of the book shifts from focusing on the rebuilding of the wall to the task of restoring the people

Now, in chapter 8, which we are looking at this morning, we are going to see the restoration really get kick-started through a watershed event that the people seem to initiate themselves

Change comes suddenly to the people of Judea as we see Ezra appear on the scene to great influence and Nehemiah kind of fade into the background of the book that bears his name

From here to the end of the book, Nehemiah's name only appears an additional four times and always in the third person by indicating that he was governor at the time

He remains a powerful and necessary presence, but he is no longer in the spotlight because now God's work has entered a new phase that requires a different leader to come forward into the spotlight, and that man is Ezra

Nehemiah was undoubtedly a godly man but Ezra was a priest, a scholar, and a teacher of the Law, and he is different from Nehemiah in almost every respect, but he has the same respect of the people that Nehemiah commanded, and it's he who God now chooses to use

God's people in and around Jerusalem needed restoration, and they found it, so let's see what we can find in their experience that will help us as the church faces the same age-old problem today

I. Restoration Begins with God's Word

Given the seemingly inborn reluctance most people have to change, what takes place in Nehemiah 8:1 is nothing short of amazing.

We read in the last verse of Nehemiah 7 (Neh. 7:37b) that, with the work on the wall being completed, the people had returned to "their towns."

You may recall last week I revealed that scholars believe that only somewhere around 10% of the Judeans in the region actually lived within the city wall of Jerusalem so the people had naturally returned to their homes in the area once their reason for being in Jerusalem had been accomplished

Then, out of the blue, without any command apparently having been given for them to do so, the people showed up and told Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses so that he might read it to them

The exiles had originally begun to return to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel some 90 years earlier and rebuilt the temple at that time but for the better part of 70 years, biblical worship had languished

Even under the preaching of Ezra who had already ministered in Jerusalem for the preceding 13 years there was little evidence of genuine enthusiasm for God's Word or spiritual matters in general

But now, just days after the completion of the wall, seemingly without warning, the people come to the city and gather in the square before the Water Gate and demand to hear God's Word

And this was no small gathering – scholars estimate the crowd to have been anywhere from 30-50 thousand people who gathered as we see in verse 1 (Neh. 8:1) "as one man"

Perhaps this was the work of Nehemiah and he may well have told the people, "Okay, you've worked hard and deserve a rest but be back here on the first of the month, and bring the women and children with you for a Bible conference"

We just can't say for certain just how it happened but, in any case, the Holy Spirit was obviously at work in breaking down any resistance and in spurring the people to come and the laypeople took the initiative; not the priests

A stage was built before the Water Gate to raise Ezra above the level of the people so that he could be seen and heard better and we read that it was large enough that 13 other religious leaders were standing alongside him

The ESV translation of verse 3 (Neh. 8:3) unfortunately obscures the meaning of the original Hebrew wording used without doing any real damage to it but diminishing the force of it a bit

What the Hebrew literally says is "from the light" which indicates the people were assembled and Ezra began to read at dawn meaning that the people were already assembled ready to listen before the sun came up

And for the next at least 6 hours, as our text says "until midday" they stood and listened to all that was said – and that included men, women, and all the children who were mature enough to have understanding of what they were hearing

Everyone was expected to be there and to be attentive – which they were for the entire morning from dawn to midday

Before we dig into what took place on that morning, I want to take care of a bit of "housekeeping" in order to avoid us taking things from the passage that we shouldn't

First, this passage doesn't tell us that our church services should be six hours long – this is a *descriptive* passage that tells us what was done on this one occasion and not a *prescriptive* passage that indicates the proper length of a service

Second, the fact that the people stood for the entire time as the Word was being read is likewise descriptive and not prescriptive

Far too much has been made of this revealed detail and it has become a kind of “litmus test” of one's reverence for God's Word in some circles – that one must always stand when God's Word is read or they are not properly reverent

We need to note that Mary is commended in Luke 10 for sitting at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching and the people actually told Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, to “sit down” and read the Scriptures to them (Jeremiah 36:15) and many other such instances when sitting was perfectly acceptable

It's a mistake in exegesis to insist that the only correct posture for hearing God's Word read is standing – but, that being said, reverence for God's Word and attentiveness to it as it is read are necessary for the believer

If standing puts you in a reverent, attentive state to hear God's Word – by all means stand – just know that the Bible doesn't say that it's necessary to stand to properly hear God's Word read aloud

As we take a look at what took place that morning I want you to make note of **three** very important things

A. They heard the Word of God read

First, the people heard the Word of God read aloud to them

We are actually blessed almost to the point of excess it seems by our access to God's Word and the ability to possess it in virtually any form for free or at a very low cost

But in Nehemiah's day, copies of the Word of God were scarce and very costly because they were hand copied onto large scrolls of papyrus or parchment

Not everyone could possess a copy for himself or herself and, besides, literacy was not what it is today so, even if one could afford a copy, not everyone had the ability to actually read one

So the only way to be exposed to any literature was by the public reading of it

What the people heard that day was some portion of the “Book of the Law,” the first five books that were written by Moses, but we have no way of knowing just how much or from where in the Law exactly Ezra read

Since it would take approximately 12 hours to read the entire five books, we are most likely safe in deducing that perhaps Ezra read excerpts from it that he found particularly relevant to their present situation

But the amazing thing to me is that the people assembled, took the practical steps of making certain they would be able to hear, and then stood attentively and reverently to hear the Word of God read to them for at least 6 hours

They truly had a hunger to hear God's Word and in doing so were listening intently to God himself

And what they heard read resulted in them **thanking** God by adding their “amen” as a solemn agreement to what they had heard, lifting up their hands in **prayer** before God, and bowing in **worship** before the Lord

All that to say that the people gave genuine attention to what was being read and the hearing of God's Word resulted in the people receiving a deeper connection to God

But they didn't just listen to the words of Scripture read they also heard the Word of God explained to them

B. They heard the Word of God explained

In verses 7-8 we see that care was taken to make certain that the people all understood what was read to them

One reason this may have been necessary simply from a practical sense is that there may well have been a language barrier that had developed over the years

The common language of the people at this time had become Aramaic and the Scriptures Ezra would have read from were in Hebrew – the people might well have simply needed a translation because without understanding listening would have been a fruitless exercise

But the sense we get from our ESV translation – and the sense I believe is correct – is that time was taken for actual exposition and explanation of what was being read

The people didn't gather to be entertained but informed and for that they needed to be taught

The people didn't just need to **hear** the Word of God they needed **understand** the Word of God

Again, we can't know for certain how exactly this was accomplished but it would seem one practical solution would have been that Ezra may have read a portion of the Word and then the designated teachers were given time to give the sense of it – that would seem sensible but we just don't know

What we do know is that pains were taken to make sure the people had understanding of what they were hearing

And the reading and understanding they received from the explanation caused the people to react

C. When they understood they reacted

The sustained reading of the Scriptures under the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit and the teaching that brought the Word home to each heart had a profound effect on the people

For many it may have been as if they were hearing the Word of God for the very first time and others might have been reunited to God's voice after a long absence from hearing it

But the Word of God searched them all, tried them, and found them wanting as they recognized and fell under corporate and individual conviction of their sin

As the Law was read and explained to the people, it was as if God himself was speaking to them and shining a spotlight on their hearts and they saw themselves as lawbreakers and sinners liable to God's punishment

And this deep awakening of how far they had strayed from God provoked an emotional response and the people began to weep and mourn with sobs of contrition and remorse brought on by the sense of unworthiness that was stirred up

At the sound of weeping we see Nehemiah appear for the only time in chapter 8 as he intervened to insist that this was not a day for weeping but rejoicing

Now, we should understand that mourning over revealed sin is the proper response – one should be troubled and greatly disturbed when under conviction of the Holy Spirit

The Bible is intended to have that effect as 1Timothy 3:16 tells us that two of the things the Word of God is profitable for are *reproof* and *correction* and being scolded and straightened out can be unpleasant and lead to tears

But there is a danger when we allow ourselves to be overcome with grief and sorrow to the degree that we fail to see what God is doing through the conviction is drawing us to redemption and wholeness

The conviction of sin is a means, not an end; the Spirit of God convinces and convicts in order to induce repentance and restoration not brokenness

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites weren't interested in merely wounding the people and they didn't want them to be left in a state of mourning and it seems the people were maybe veering into collective emotional hysteria which would have been inappropriate because it focused on uncertainty rather than the assurance of God's forgiveness

So Nehemiah intervened to insist that this was not a day for weeping but a day for rejoicing a day for feasting on sweet wine and rich food and the Levites, who were likely in amongst the people, calmed and consoled them

So Nehemiah wasn't saying that it was wrong to weep over one's revealed sin but that *today*, that particular occasion, was to be a day filled with joy

In verse 12 (Neh. 8:12) we see that the people understood all that they had heard and their understanding resulted in them dispersing while praising God to begin their feast – they were **obedient** and their obedience continued

I don't want to spend a lot of time on the Feast of Booths that is described in the remainder of the chapter because that is a sermon for another day

But in verse 13 (Neh. 8:13) we see a meeting the next day that apparently included only the men and Ezra where Ezra reintroduced the command of participating in the annual Feast of Booths that God had instituted to remind them of their Exodus

And the thing we want to notice is that the response of the men was complete and immediate obedience

As soon as they knew what God required of them they rushed to perform it – no questions asked, no excuses made, and no delay given – they were not merely hearers of God's Word they became doers of it

The hearing and understanding of God's Word led to sorrow followed by joy followed by obedience – all of which point to the restoration and renewal of the people of God

That's the historical context and meaning of our passage so let's now quickly take a look at the three necessities of restoration for us in our time

II. Three Necessities of Restoration

I don't believe we can deny that our world needs to be reformed and renewed but we must also admit that we must first focus on ourselves and that the church and her people are in need of continual spiritual restoration and renewal

Let me share with you three necessities of spiritual restoration of God's people that can only lead to us having better spiritual lives leading to better understanding and influence in the world

First, each Christ-follower must personally read God's Word for himself or herself

A. Must personally read God's Word

Out of all the methods God could have used, I don't know why God chose to communicate with his people primarily by the written word but he did

And because he did, the clear expectation is that his people will pick up what he has provided and actually read in order to hear what he has to say to them

We are blessed to live in a time and place where we have an abundant access to copies of God's Word in whichever translation or whatever form we find most convenient, easiest to understand, or most profitable to read

A 2012 survey by LifeWay Research revealed that 9 out of 10 households in the United States owns a Bible and that 84% of Americans own more than one Bible with the average being 3.6 Bibles per respondent who claimed to read the Bible at least once a month

But another survey conducted in 2020 revealed that only 13.7% of Americans claim to read their Bible on a daily basis and 34% report they never read the Bible at all

Clearly, we have adequate access to the Scriptures but, for some reason, we don't bother to open them and the excuses provided to LifeWay Research for not reading the Bible more ranged from the usual "I don't have time" to "I don't read books" to the perhaps most honest of all, "I don't prioritize it"

"I don't prioritize it" – that should send chills up our spines if that's our reason for not reading God's Word because we *always* make time for what is important to us

I doubt any of us would be comfortable going through our day without checking in on our favorite news sites, without reading a new blog post by our favorite commenter, or without seeing what our friends are up to on Facebook

But, for some reason, we have no problem going for days, weeks, and even months without opening our Bibles to deliberately hear from the very Creator and Sustainer of the universe

In Nehemiah's day, and still for many language groups today, there was no way for an individual to actually read God's Word for themselves but such is not the case for us today

Whether we reach for a hardcover or softcover Bible or pocket New Testament or whether we simply open an app on our electronic device, God's Word is available to let us hear the voice of God anytime we want to hear

And, if we want renewal and restoration to occur, hearing from God one on one is the key – we must personally read God's Word and hear his voice speaking to us personally

Unfortunately, due to the nature of the Bible, reading may not always immediately impart understanding and we regularly need additional help with interpreting it –

We see that in the example of the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8 who needed help from Philip the evangelist to understand what he was reading

Therefore, in addition to reading the Bible for ourselves, we must also be properly taught God's Word

B. Must be properly taught God's Word

The Bible was written by 40 different authors on three continents in three different languages that most of us don't speak over a span of 1,600 years that ended close to 2,000 years ago to address cultures very different from ours

Therefore, we must often labor to understand the author's original intent when he wrote to a specific people group in a specific place and time who were going through specific circumstances

Then we need to take what we find and see how it fits together with the entire Bible as a unified whole because the Bible isn't a series of isolated teachings and wise sayings but God's own voice that speaks on subjects throughout its pages

For that reason, Bible reading that leads to an accurate understanding can mean a great deal of study, research, and knowing more about the original languages of the Bible and so forth than is practical for everyone

To help us, God has wisely and graciously provided his church with those who are gifted in those things and he has given them to the church to do the study and then to equip the saints through teaching so that everyone can be spiritually mature and equipped for God's service (Ephesians 4:11-14)

First, it's the job of those pastor-teachers to make the Bible easy to understand – **to provide clarity**

Second, they must make sure that the Bible is being understood **accurately**

Taken out of context and left to our own imaginations, we can make verses and passages in the Bible say whatever we want them to say and many people do just that whether knowingly with intent or unknowingly by accident

Teachers assist in proper understanding by being diligent to present individual passages within the whole context of the Word of God and the context in which it was written so that it can be understood accurately

Then the teacher helps by providing context for today – that is to say they help us **apply** what we learn to our lives and situations

Knowledge isn't worth much until it is applied and every student should always be asking the question, "So what? Now what?" when presented with biblical truth - What difference should this text make in my life today?

A good Bible teacher will not shy away from such questions because the whole reason for hearing from God's Word is to gain accurate understanding and discover what God wants us to know

Then, once we are regularly reading God's Word and being taught God's Word we need to do something with the information

We must promptly obey God's Word

C. Must promptly obey God's Word

Just as the Judean men in Nehemiah's day promptly obeyed once they had understanding of what God required of them, we too must be quick to do what God shows us

It's quite dangerous to open God's Word and to sit under the teaching of God's Word if you don't intend to do anything in response to what is revealed

We read in Luke 12:48 that *"...the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more."*

Clearly knowing brings responsibility and God holds us responsible for properly using what he has given us so it is foolish to seek God's knowledge and then not respond to it – we must read and study it with the intention of doing it

So, in the final analysis, we must read God's Word for ourselves to hear directly from God and allow the Holy Spirit to interpret what we read and give us understanding because that is how God primarily speaks to us

Then we must seek and sit under good, solid Bible teaching and preaching to give us further understanding and insights that we might otherwise miss or misunderstand

And then we must respond immediately with obedience as the people of Nehemiah's day did as soon as they had understanding

Lastly, we want to see that the result of all this will be rejoicing

III. The Result is Rejoicing

Many people today don't want to be constrained – they don't want anyone, even God, telling them what to do

But being constrained by God's Word is the most freeing and most joyful thing there is

In verse 17 we see that the people went and built their booths and remained in them for the prescribed seven days and "there was great rejoicing"

They had heard God's voice and in doing what he commanded, they found true, lasting joy

And that will be the result for any of God's people when they hear and respond to his voice

Personally reading, properly understanding, and promptly obeying cannot help but result in plentiful rejoicing

Conclusion

It should be evident that hearing from God through his Word and thereby discovering his thoughts will have spiritual benefits for us – after all, we know we should seek to cultivate and possess the mind of Christ in order to be like Christ

But reading and understanding what we find in God's Word also has practical benefits as we find God's thoughts and learn to think them after him

We can look to Romans 12:1-2 which tell us that God wants us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds to be in line with God's mind – but that means we have to hear God's thoughts and that means reading God's Word

Let me encourage you to spend some time reading and reflecting on **1Corinthians 2** which reveals a great deal about the mind of Christ and how it differs from the so called wisdom of the world

When I began this morning I mentioned some of the problems we face in the world today and the challenges that confront us with some of the ideas and beliefs the world is trying to instill in society through forced indoctrination

And I mentioned that dealing with those issues has proven challenging to many in the church because they don't know what the Bible says about some very fundamental matters that – once understood – easily dispel much of what is being repeated as facts but are truly inconsistent with reality

God is waiting to speak to you through his written Word – the only question is whether you will open its covers and allow God to speak or silence his voice

Both spiritual and practical renewal and restoration begin with God's Word and God is waiting for your response

Let's pray