

Re: Formed
Nehemiah 8
Mercy Hill Church | August 27, 2023

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. ¹³ On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. ¹⁴ And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." ¹⁶ So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. ¹⁸ And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

Big Idea: *God's Word, by His Spirit, reforms our minds, our hearts and our lives, into Christ-likeness for our well-being and the glory of God!*

Introduction

- Who or what has shaped you to be the person you are today?
1. **Read God's Word - Head (vv.1-8)**
 - *Leviticus 23:23-26:* ²³ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴ "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 convocation. ²⁵ You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the LORD."
 - Not just that they read (or listened to) the Word of God but how...

- **...With a hunger (for God's Word) (vv.1, 3)**
 - The returning exiles, the people of God, were united ("gathered as one man") in their desire to hear the Word of God (re: "Book of the Law of Moses" – Torah, Pentateuch (Genesis – Deuteronomy)).
 - *Psalm 119:97-104*: Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. ⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.¹⁰¹ I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.¹⁰² I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me. ¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! ¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.
 - Notice the location ("the square before the Water Gate" – not the courtyard of the Temple) – a public location where anyone and everyone could gather.
 - Not just the priests or religious leaders or men, but women and "all who could understand what they heard..." most scholars believe this refers to children.
 - *Acts 2:42-47* ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.
 - "From early morning until midday" = ~4-6 hours! Not the entire Torah but read *parts* of it (v.3 "from it") and they listened "attentively" (v.3)
- How did they hear the reading of the God's Word?
- **...With humility (and reverence) (vv.5-6)**
 - Stood (v.5) – demonstrated respect or honor to God
 - Lifted their hands (v.6) – demonstrated need or dependence on God
 - Bowed their heads and faces to the ground (v.6) – demonstrated their worship and submission (acknowledgement of God's worth and power). Hebrew word for "worship" means to "bow down"
 - Side Note: Nehemiah at this point in fades into the background and Ezra the scribe/priest steps forth in leading the people. We see Nehemiah's humility in handing he reigns to Ezra.
- Many of us, Christians and non-Christians approach God's Word not with humility and reverence but cynicism, doubt or even worse, boredom.
- **...With help (from others) (vv.7-8)**
 - People then did not have their personal copies of the Bible – have to wait almost 2,00 years later for the printing press to be invented (~1500 A.D.)! Many were illiterate.
 - Ezra reads the Word of God from a platform/stage (v.4) so his voice could be heard – no microphones or speakers.
 - Ezra had help from 13 men (v.4) – possibly they helped in holding the scroll and/or possibly helped read. What's interesting is that these men do not seem to be Levites or any specific titles (cf. v.7 – "Levites"). Lay leaders.
 - In addition, list of 13 Levites (v. 7) who "helped the people to understand the Law while people remained in their places" (like small groups?)...v.8 "from the book of the Law, *clearly*"

- A couple of possible interpretations of this:
 - 1. Interpreted: Translated from Hebrew to Aramaic (or the local dialect)
 - 2. Section by section: Explaining each section by section
 - End result is the people had help in understanding the Word of God.
 - Communal approach to God's Word – not just individual, but as a community (historical and global)
 - The Centrality of God's Word in the Christian life and church
 - 4 Characteristics of Scripture (From Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*)
 - 1. Authority of Scripture
 - 2. Clarity (Perspicuity) of Scripture - "...means that the Bible is written in such a way that it is able to be understood, but right understanding requires time, effort, the use of ordinary means, a willingness to obey, and the help of the Holy Spirit; and our understanding will remain imperfect in this lifetime."
 - 3. Necessity of Scripture – for knowing the Gospel (Romans 10:13-17)
 - General Revelation – God exists, God's character and morality
 - Divine Revelation – Scripture, the Gospel
 - 4. Sufficiency of Scripture – "that Scripture contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly and for obeying him perfectly."

2. **Responded to God's Word – Heart (vv. 9-12)**

- The Word of God didn't just tickle their minds but also touched their hearts.
 - Cf. *Acts 2:37* Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"
- *How* did they respond?
- **...Wept and grieved (vv. 9-11)**
 - Convicted – they were listening attentively and had a humble posture. They inevitably saw God's holiness, goodness, power, love, grace and sovereignty – and saw themselves in all their brokenness, shortcomings, faults and sins in light of who God is and what God desired of them. As they looked into the mirror of God's Word, the reality of who they were – and who God had called them to be, but weren't – became crystal clear.
 - The reason for them being exiles (conquered by other nations) was their unfaithfulness to God.
 - What is our natural response when we realize things are not the way they're supposed to be, when we realize we've messed up, when reality smacks us in the face? We weep and grieve...(Side note: We will see the return or emphasis on repentance next time in Nehemiah 9)
 - Why do Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites tell the people to *not* mourn or weep – but rather to feast and celebrate (party!)
- **...and Rejoiced! (vv.11-12)**
 - 1st day of the 7th month was a holy convocation and a day of rest began with a trumpet blast to remind people to prepare for the holiest month of the year (Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Feast of Booths).
 - This day is holy – set apart for God! There will be a time and place for weeping, mourning and repentance (cf. Nehemiah 9)
 - Joy of the Lord is your strength (or refuge, protection).

- "...is an emotion that comes from knowing and trusting in God's character, power and promises. It is not dependent on our current circumstances or feelings but rather based on a deep faith in His goodness."
 - Knowing God is their protector; God isn't against them but for them
 - Even in their grief and guilt God is their refuge, safe place, place of protection.
 - In the Christian life, a deep sense of joy is an important part of a person's relationship with God – God is a God of joy – and calls to joy in Him!
- The power of Scripture by the Holy Spirit to engage not just our minds but our hearts – not just mentally but emotionally, not just our thoughts but our feelings as well.
 - Diversity, unity and beauty of Scripture: Different genres of the Bible engage us in different ways – heads and our hearts, our minds and our affections
- Scripture doesn't just transform/reform our minds but also our hearts – what we care about, what we love, what moves us.
 - Speaking of which notice in v.10: "...send portions to anyone who has nothing ready..." (cf. Acts 2:42-47)
- God's Word & Evangelism/Missions
 - John Stott: "Whenever Christians lose confidence in the Bible, they also lose zeal for evangelism."
 - 4 reasons why the Bible is indispensable to world evangelization:
 - 1. Mandate for World Evangelization
 - 2. Message for World Evangelization – what we are to say
 - 3. Model for World Evangelization – how to say it. Bible just doesn't contain the Gospel, it is the gospel
 - 4. Power for World Evangelization – "The word of God will prove its divine origin by its divine power"

3. Responded to God's Word in Obedience - Hands (vv. 13-18)

- On the second day, it's not everybody but rather the leaders (re: "heads of the father houses...and the Levites") who continue to study the Word of God.
 - As they come across Leviticus 23:33-44: "...42 Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths 43 so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God."
- "...as it is written" (v.15) => "So the people went out...and made booths" (v.16)
 - The people of God not only read the Word of God, not only responded to the word of God but ultimately obeyed the Word of God.
 - The Word of God affected (reformed) their heads, their hearts and their hands
 - How do you know when you really understand, know or believe something? It's when you're able to do it or live life accordingly.
 - Quote: Aristotle stated, "One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try."
 - *Matthew 7:24-27* ²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

- Isn't all this talk about obedience, obeying God's commands legalism and antithetical to the Gospel?
 - **Quote: "Legalism is pursuing good works with the intention of earning God's favor...the essence of legalism is when faith is not the engine of obedience." Trillia Newbell & John Piper**
 - Obedience (good works) with the intention of earning, obtaining, securing salvation, forgiveness and God's favor is legalism
 - Obedience (good works) which comes from faith, trust and assurance in Jesus is not.
 - Indicative (what God has done for in Christ) => the imperative (what we are to do)
 - *1 John 2:1-6* My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. ³ And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.
- "Very great rejoicing" (v.18)
 - There is joy in following and obeying God's Word. God's commands are meant for our good , flourishing and growth! And when we're walking in tune with God, there is great joy (and peace and hope).

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Recommended Resources

- Next Steps: Walk the Sacred Path (Mercy Hill Church)
- Habits of Grace by David Mathis
- Devotionals for Children/Teens: XTB (Exploring the Bible), Engage (365), and Discover by The Good Book Company

Reflection Questions:

- Why is God's Word so important in the Christian faith/life of Christians?
- What influence or significance does the Bible have in your life?
- When have you personally experienced – or seen in others – a hunger for God's Word?
- In what ways is it easy for you to read and hear God's Word but not respond? Why?
- In what ways is it easy to be moved or convicted by God's Word, yet not obey? Why?
- What are some ways you can grow in God's Word -- individually and/or as a community (e.g. church, home/DNA group, marriage/family, etc.)?
- Why is the Bible so important in evangelism (and missions)?