

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 Introduction

Today we turn our attention to the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8. This chapter serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of hearing and understanding God's word. In our fast-paced world, it is easy to become distracted and lose sight of the profound impact that the scriptures can have on our lives. Nehemiah 8 shows us that when we devote ourselves to listening and comprehending God's word, we experience a transformation that touches our hearts, minds, and souls.

Nehemiah 8 begins with a remarkable scene: all the people of Israel gather as one in the square before the Water Gate. They ask Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. This gathering was not a casual assembly; it was a deliberate and collective effort by the community to reconnect with their divine heritage. The Israelite people had been exiled to Babylon, where they spent over a century in slavery and captivity, and now they had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple that was destroyed in 587 BC. While they were in Babylon there was no written word of God available, only the oral traditions that kept the people connected. The people's eagerness to hear the word of God is evident, and it is a lesson for us today. We, too, must approach God's word with a sincere desire to listen and understand.

Ezra's role in this chapter is crucial. He stands on a wooden platform built for the occasion, and as he opens the book, all the people stand up. This act of reverence underscores the sacredness of the scriptures. Ezra blesses the Lord, and the people respond with "Amen, Amen," lifting their hands and bowing down in worship. This moment of collective worship emphasizes the importance of honoring God's word and recognizing its authority in our lives. It also demonstrates the humility with which we need to approach God's word.

Ezra reads from the Book of the Law from morning until midday, that is about 6 hours of listening to the Bible being read. I served a church where, I was told, if a previous pastor would allow the service to go past an hour a man would get up from his pew, walk to the back of the church, and point to his wrist watch. If someone has a hard time with an hour's worth of worship, can you imagine how hungry the people returning from exile must have been to hear God's word to stand for 6 hours? The Levites help the people understand the reading. The Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, were written in biblical Hebrew, a language that was no longer understood by most of the people, so the Levites would have translated. And they may have offered an explanation of what was meant by what had been read. This process highlights two essential elements: the reading of the word and the explanation of its meaning. It is not enough to simply hear the scriptures; we must also strive to understand them.

The people's reaction to the reading of the Law is profound. As they hear and understand the words, they are moved to tears. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites reassure them, saying, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." They encourage the people to celebrate, for "the joy of the Lord is your strength." This passage teaches us that understanding God's word can evoke deep emotions and lead to a renewed sense of joy and strength.

How can we apply the lessons of Nehemiah 8 to our lives today? First, we must prioritize the reading and hearing of God's word. In our busy schedules, it is essential to

set aside time for scripture. Whether through personal study, group Bible study, or listening to sermons, we need to make God's word a central part of our daily lives.

Next, we must seek to understand what we read. This may involve studying commentaries or attending a Bible study where God's word is discussed with other believers. Just as the Levites helped the people of Israel understand the Law, we can benefit from the insights and teachings of others. And I know we have no children here, but if we did, and you wanted to learn more about the Bible, teaching a group of kids about the Bible is the best way to do that. I can remember the first time I taught a classroom of 2nd and 3rd graders. The teacher's book gave invaluable insights to the Bible stories they were learning which helped answer the questions of inquisitive youngsters. There were times when I would be asked a question I did not know how to answer and I would have to tell them that, but with a promise that I would find out. That's where I learned about Bible commentaries, books written by biblical scholars which go into detail about what is written. I'm going to ask you to pray for our church, pray that we will attract families with young children who are hungry to learn about the stories in the Bible including Jesus and all he has done for us.

Finally, we must respond to God's word with worship and obedience. The people of Israel wept with conviction and rejoiced with gratitude. Similarly, we should allow the scriptures to touch our hearts, inspire our worship, and guide our actions. Can you recall a time when the scriptures touched you so deeply that you wept or rejoiced? The truth of God's Word motivates us in our faith. It motivates us to study when it's uncomfortable, it drives us to dig deeper into Scripture and let God's word shine the light of truth on our lives and then we can shine it on the lives of others. This can be a painful process. It's called conviction and repentance. It's painful because it reveals our flaws and mistakes. It shows us that we are often not the person we claim to be, it reveals deeper problems that lie silently below the surface. This is what God's word does to us; it's not always an enjoyable experience but it does bring great joy in the end!

A cartoonist successfully divided the entire human race into two types with one telling illustration. The cartoon pictured two women at a well. Each has a bucket with which to draw water. One woman, looking sad and bitter, remarks, "Life is terrible. Every time I fill this bucket up, it is empty within minutes." The other woman, who appears at peace with herself, replies, "I think life is wonderful. Every time this bucket is empty, I can simply fill it up again."

Is the bucket always being emptied or always being filled? It is a clear depiction of the old question of "is the glass half-empty or half-full?". But does it really make any difference how you see the glass, how you view that bucket? If you are thinking theologically, the answer is a definite "yes, for the people of God, the glass is half-full". The bucket is being perpetually filled.

While Nehemiah and Ezra proclaimed that the joy of the Lord is your strength, the New Testament promises an even more astounding new reality - that Jesus came so that our joy may be full.

In conclusion, Nehemiah 8 reminds us of the transformative power of hearing and understanding God's word. As we gather to listen, seek to understand, and respond with worship, we draw closer to God and experience the joy and strength that come from God's presence. Let's commit ourselves to making God's word a priority in our lives, knowing that it has the power to shape us, guide us, and draw us into a deeper relationship with our Creator.

All glory be to God. Amen.