

Nehemiah 8:1-18¹ ***We are People of the Word***

Introduction

The last time I preached from Nehemiah was about the completion of the building of the wall of Jerusalem in Chapter 6. Governor Nehemiah had led the people to complete the wall in just 52 days. All this was done in the midst of much opposition both from within and without.

Now, imagine Israel is to have a national day of celebration to rejoice in this achievement. What do you think it would be like? Among other things, maybe one thing the nation would do is to confer a citation for special achievement on Nehemiah. This citation would read something like this:

To: His Excellency, our Beloved Governor Nehemiah

From: The People of New Israel

This is to acknowledge you as the legendary figure in the New Israel of our time. By your great leadership that's marked with dedication and courage, you have mobilized all Israel to come together to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. To complete this in just 52 days in the midst of internal strife and external sabotage would be beyond us if you have not led us to put aside our differences and fight our common enemy. Indeed, we have prevailed because you have led us to trust and obey Yahweh our Lord. You have helped us to experience His promises of our national solidarity and security. Most of all by your example of faith and faithfulness, you have led us to once again experience the joy of being the people of the Sovereign Lord Himself.

May Yahweh make His face shine upon you and bless you with His grace and favour both now and always.

After this great national achievement, it is not too far fetched to think of such a citation for Nehemiah. It's like how we celebrate our national day every year. National day awards/citations are conferred on those who have contributed significantly to the nation.

In Nehemiah 8, we indeed read of a national time of celebration in New Israel. Before that in Nehemiah 7 just after the completion of the wall in Nehemiah 6, we read of a long list of the names of all those who have returned to Jerusalem from exile. It is a long record of the names of families.

Why a long and boring list of family names after the completion of the wall? Why

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not the mention of just one name who had singularly led the nation out of ruins and into national sovereignty, security, and solidarity—i.e. the name of Nehemiah?

If all Scripture is inspired and instructive, what is God trying to instruct us with this long and boring list of names when only one name (Nehemiah) seems to be needed and enough?

I believe if there's one thing that God is trying to teach in Scripture here is this—the building of the wall is completed not by just one man, but by one people. The long list of names in Nehemiah is God's citations of all those who have rolled up their sleeves and worked to complete the wall. It is God's honour roll in which those who have contributed to this divine project would be forever remembered in the pages of Scripture.

And so when we come to Nehemiah 8, we see and hear a national celebration. We don't see the Prime Minister or President standing aloft and waving to the people. But we see a priest (Ezra) standing on a high wooden platform (v. 4). Also, we don't hear the Prime Minister or President speaking his state-of-the-nation address in a changing world. But we hear the priest speaking from the Book of the Law about the promises of an unchanging God to His people and His expectations of them. I will use the term "God's Word" in my message here to refer to the "Book of the Law" in the text.

Let's examine deeper what this means for us today to be a people of God's Word.

I. 7:73b - 8:8

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the

LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear F21 and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

We have come to the moment in the account when the great work was accomplished. The rubble was cleared, the walls were built up, the openings were closed, the gates were hung, and the locks were fitted. The city was now defended again. In addition, Nehemiah appointed guards and established all the responsible people who should care for the city: the gatekeepers, singers, Levites, and others. Everything was in place. The job they had worked so hard to do was done.

Throughout the whole experience, the people had learned to trust one another, depend on one another, serve one another, and protect one another. The community of believers came together. They had been God's instruments to build a city. They had been knitted together into a family. They had seen God use them.

They had been God's servants. Now, they wanted to be God's worshipers. The people "assembled as one man", and they called out, "Ezra, bring out God's Word and teach it to us."

They wanted not Nehemiah but Ezra (their priest) to be high on the platform (8:4). In Israel, the priest is the mediator between God and the people. To ask for the priest is to seek the presence and person of God in worship.

That's where God-centred service should lead us—i.e. to want to worship God and be drawn closer to Him. I wonder if you have this experience of serving God so hard and so much that some things happen to you one day. You come to a point when you don't want to worship God anymore, you don't want to come to church anymore, you don't want to pray anymore, and you don't want to read the Bible anymore. Has this ever happened to you?

The people of Israel were doing God's work for them in the midst of great odds and challenges. Yet they did not become a spent force after the completion of the wall. Rather, they wanted to move from mere doing as God's servants to being as God's worshipers. They teach us some valuable lessons on serving God:

- We serve by trusting and drawing on God's strength.
- We serve by depending on God yet interdependently of one another.
- We serve with the motive to advance God's work and not our personal agenda.
- We serve with the anticipation of seeing God fulfilling His will in and through us.

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In the past, the centre of Jewish national life had sometimes been the temple, sometimes the monarchy, and sometimes the patriarchs. But here in Neh 8, the nation wanted to be a people of God's Word.

It is the Word that reveals God to His people. In the Word, God displays His person, His character, His promises, and His expectations. But note this—the call to Ezra to read and teach the Word was no worship of the Word, no desire for knowledge for its own sake. The seeking of God in the Word was what the Israelites hoped for. That's what was happening here. God was made plainly known through this time of reading, instructing and understanding of the Word.

Ezra and others throughout the crowd helped people understand the Word. They put it in words that could be received and applied. They connected the reality of the people to the reality of the text. It needs to be taught and explained. The people couldn't get enough of the teaching and learning. They came back day after day to hear the Word of God.

This hunger for God's Word comes when people get tired. Not tired because you have been serving and serving. But tired because you are finally tired of being where you come from and you want to be where God is. The people of Israel wanted to hear the words of God because they wanted to know the God who had spoken those words.

God's Word is not a "magic book" that changes people or circumstances because somebody reads it or recites it. But God's Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life-changing power.

Scripture tells us that Ezra brought out the Book (v. 1) and opened it (v. 5). And more than that, the Book was read to them (v. 8). Ezra started his reading and teaching early in the morning and continued through midday (v. 3), which means the congregation stood and listened for five or six hours; and this continued for a week (v. 18).

And when they heard the Word being read, they raised up their hands in praise and bowed down with their faces to the ground in worship (v. 6).

The Levites assisted Ezra in teaching the Word (v. 7). They probably mingled with the people and, when there was a break in the reading, answered questions and told them how to apply the Word to their own lives. Here we have a balance between the public proclamation of the Word in the large assembly and the personal application in the smaller groups. Both are important.

So, what does it mean to be the people of the Word? The first thing we learn is this—we the people of the Word do not worship the Word, but worship the God who speaks through His Word.

II. 8:9-12

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

As Ezra read and explained the Word, the assembly's first response was one of conviction and grief. They mourned over their sins.

Assisted by the Levites, Nehemiah (at last, he came into the picture!) convinced the people to stop mourning and start celebrating (v. 9). Now, this does not mean that it is sin to mourn over sin. But it is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.

The secret of Christian joy is to believe what God says in His Word and act upon it. Faith that isn't based on the Word is not faith at all. It is presumption or superstition. Joy that isn't the result of faith is not joy at all. It is only a "good feeling" that will soon disappear. Faith based on the Word will produce joy that will weather the storms of life.

When the Word was read and taught to them, the people heard the truth and realized their failure and wept. I wonder what we tend to do when the Word of God points out our own sinfulness.

- Do we immediately stop reading, close the Bible, or skip to somewhere else?
- Do we say: "Now that part of the Bible does not apply to our modern days anymore"?
- Do we say: "Now that part of the Bible is for other people but not for me"?
- Do we say: "That's not important to Christian living; I can choose to obey or not to"?
- Do we say: "There's always time to work on it; so no hurry for now"?

Nehemiah said this to the grieving people, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (v. 9).

The teaching Levite priests also reassured the people in the same way (v. 11).

Now this does not mean that it is okay to realize where you have sinned and failed and be happy about it because God understands, He's forgiving, He's gracious, etc. Rather, the call is this, "Stop crying, stop mourning. The joy of the LORD is your strength. Sin and failure is not the end of the story."

Crucifixion was not the end of the story of Jesus' life. The resurrection and the ascension followed. If we understand what we're being taught in the Bible, we will come to the place of joy. Every effort to make biblical faith something that is filled only with sadness, hatred, and fear is a lie.

One of my key responsibilities as Pastor is to preach and teach the Word. There may be times when I have to speak some hard words of Scripture to point us back to the heart of God and walk the path of biblical truth. My prayer is that I will not do it to hurt, insult, belittle, or embarrass you. My prayer is that I will not do it to put so much sadness, hatred and fear in you that you lost the joy and hope in Christian living. But if I have unintentionally done so, please forgive me and come tell me about it.

In the midst of realizing their sin and failure as the Word was read and taught to them, the people grieved and mourned. But it was not without hope because such a realization was essential in letting God do that reviving and renewing work in their lives.

So what does it mean to be the people of the Word? A second thing we learn is this: we the people of the Word rejoice in God's strength because our weakness and failure is not the end of our story.

III. 8:13-18

On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths"—as it is written.

So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

It is not enough to hear the Word of God. We must obey what it tells us to do. The people heard the celebration of the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles). They obeyed what they heard by reviving the celebration of this feast.

During the seven days of this feast, the Jews lived in booths made of branches and usually built on the flat roofs of their houses. It was a time for looking back and remembering the nation's forty years of wandering in the wilderness, when the people were homeless and lived in temporary shelters. But the feast was also a time for looking around at the harvest blessings from the hand of God. The Lord had given them a good land, and they were never to forget the Giver as they enjoyed the gifts. The Feast of Booths was also an occasion for looking ahead to the glorious kingdom God promised His people Israel. It was a week-long festival of joyful praise and thanksgiving, focusing on the goodness of the Lord.

The Feast of Booths was a time for sending food and gifts to others, especially to those who were needy. The Jews had found joy in hearing the Word of God, but now they found joy in sharing the blessings of God. The mind grows by taking in, but the heart grows by giving out. It is important to maintain such a balance.

Neh 8:17 does not teach that the nation had ignored the Feast of Booths since the days of Joshua. The feast was celebrated during King Solomon's day (2 Chron. 8:13) and also when the Babylonian exiles had returned to the land (Ezra 3:1-4). It was not the event of the celebration that was so special but the way they celebrated—"the Israelites had not celebrated it like this" (Neh 8:17). It appears that everybody participated enthusiastically. Because every family made a booth, some of the people had to move from the houses into the streets and squares of the city. Apparently in previous years, not all the Jews had made booths and lived in them for the week of the feast. They had given only "token" acknowledgment of the feast. Furthermore, the joyful attitude of the people was beyond anything the nation had ever seen.

But in addition to being a harvest festival, the point of building booths was to remind the Jews that they had once wandered in the wilderness. There had been a time when they had no place to call home, no protection, no city, nothing but God to preserve their identity and keep them safe.

The Feast of Booths had served as a reminder and promise of better things to come for the Jews. They would not live forever in temporary shelters because God would lead them into a land of “milk and honey” to be their permanent home.

For the first time in more than two generations, Jerusalem was built again. The city was a protection; the walls were up, the gates were strong. For the first time after a long, long while, they could say, “Ah, we have a home again.”

But the word of God says, “Remember, in truth your home is nowhere in this world.” We are always going to be wanderers. The city we long for is glorious, but it’s not here. We are always without a home until we have that home. We are a pilgrim people.

After they finally had their city rebuilt, God reminded them, “Don’t count on the walls that you’ve built.” Every one of us must always count on the God who is present with us. The place we are headed for is our eternal home, not this world. We shouldn’t sink our roots too deep; we shouldn’t love too much what this world has for us.

What does it mean to be the people of the Word? A third thing we can learn is this: we the people of the Word live with the hope that even if we lose the good things in this world, we will never miss the best things in heaven.

Conclusion

Watch Youtube video: *Neglected Bible*
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AHS6K_xsxQ)

Remember what Ezra did with the Word. He did not just bring it out and waved it at the people. He opened it, read it, explained it, and led the people to obey it. Many of you have brought your Bible today. That’s good. But I want to ask a more important question—“Have you opened your Bible this week, read it, understood it, and obeyed it?”

We are people in this world but not of this world. Let’s seek the Lord to help us grow to be the people of His Word in this world.