

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

If you haven't been with us, we have been working our way through the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. I would encourage you to go back through the whole study by visiting our website. It has been equally challenging and encouraging.

As a reminder, the Israelites have returned from the Babylonian exile. They were exiled for their lack of faith in and worship of God. After their return, they built the Temple, rebuilt the wall that protects Jerusalem, and rebuilt their own homes, and they were living there. They did all of this in spite of massive opposition by the surrounding peoples.

[Read Nehemiah 8]

[Summary] Nehemiah 8 teaches us that **God's word** and **God's presence require** a response and **inspire** joy and hope.

In order to understand this, we must examine the people that God is revealing himself to.

A. The people are seeking understanding.

The people of God come out of their towns and gather together and ask for the scroll to be unrolled and for the 'book of the law of Moses' to be read to them. They were asking for the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy to be read to them, aloud so that they could understand. The text makes a particular emphasis on understanding and attentiveness.

- a. "...both men and women and all who could **understand** what they heard..." (v 2)
- b. "...in the presence of the men and women and those who could **understand**. And the ears of all the people were **attentive** to the Book of the Law." (v 3)
- c. "The Levites, helped the people to **understand** the Law..." (v 7)

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

- d. “They read from the book, from the Law of God, **clearly**, and they gave the sense so that the people **understood** the reading.” (v 8)
- e. “...because they had **understood** the words that were declared to them.” (v 12)

We’ll address why this is important for us in a moment, but we need to see that the passage is emphasizing the importance of hearing and understanding the Word of God.

B. We have a people who have readied themselves to hear the Word of God.

How can we know this?

- a. They gathered as one man into the square. (v 1)
- b. They had previously prepared a wooden platform for Ezra (v 4)
- c. There was a leadership structure to help the people understand what was being said and to teach (v 4, 7)

These details may seem insignificant, but they characterize the people of God. Let’s put it a different way. When Ashley and I go on a date, unless it happens to be a last minute decision, the date is planned. The reservations are made. The money is set aside. The babysitter is in place. And all of this effort and preparation is put in place so that I can spend time with my bride. It is an important part of any marriage. I prepare to spend with my wife, and I seek to know and understand her better. Our relationship with God is not all that different.

The people of God wanted to know more about God, and prepared to know and understand him. Is that true of you? Of me? Are you more interested in your iPhone and instagram or are you seeking to know the Lord? Do you check out during the sermon or do you engage the Word of God? When you go to Community Group, are you there for the meal or to hear what the Lord has been teaching the others in the group, and to learn

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

from them, to learn from the Bible? When you read the Bible or come to church, are you seeking understanding? Have you prepared yourself to come? Are you expecting a simple encouragement or are you ready to be challenged and shaped by the Bible? These people were ready and anticipating God's work in their lives.

Not only were they ready, when the time came, they received what God was saying through the scriptures and responded.

1. The Word and presence of God requires a response. (v 1-8/9)

When the people of God heard the Word read and explained a response welled up in them.

a. Example

When my oldest son, Judah, was born, it evoked an incredible response from me. I was holding Ashley's leg in the hospital, really excited and a little terrified and I was sick. Then Ashley groaned and pushed. And out came this little purplish, blue alien. I was in absolute shock and awe. My mind was running a thousand miles a minute and my heart was full of awe and joy. And I forgot about everything else around me. The nurse had to tell me that I could go see him. I was paralyzed with awe.

b. Exposition: The response of Nehemiah's new colony wasn't all that different from my experience. They had an incredible response that we can look at in three connected parts.

i. They understood with their minds.

"They read from the book, from the Law of God, **clearly**, and they gave the sense so that the people **understood** the reading." (v 8)

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

- ii. They were affected emotionally.
“For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” (v 9)

- iii. They were moved to act
“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. 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.” (v 5-6)

- c. The response of the people incorporates every part of a person. The people hear & understand, they are moved and feel, and they respond physically. This is the totality of an individual.

As we read earlier, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 emphasizes the same thing: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **might**.” The call of the Bible is to love God with your whole person: heart, soul and strength.

Jesus emphasizes this same point in Mark 12:30

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **mind** and with all your **strength**.’ If we are to obey this command, as Nehemiah’s exiles did, then we must understand what his command is asking us to do. Let’s look at each of these three parts.

- i. The **heart**, for the Hebrew people, was the seat of thought, the inner sanctum. It was where you dwell and meditate. [Jesus made this clear by adding mind when he referenced Deuteronomy 6.]

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

“Trust in the LORD with all your **heart**, and do not lean on your own **understanding**.” Prov 3:5-6

“For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and **understand with their heart**
and turn, and I would heal them.” Acts 28:27

“The **heart** of him who has **understanding** seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly.” Proverbs 15:14

Very often, when we read heart in the Bible, we connect the heart with emotions, but the Bible tends to connect the heart with a person’s inner thoughts and meditations.

- ii. The **soul** is the seat of the affections and desires of a person. The word soul is used in a variety of ways in the Bible, and can be debated, but for our purposes let’s equate the soul to the seat of emotions, even though its probably more.

“Then they said to one another, ‘In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the **distress of his soul**, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.’”
Genesis 42:21

“I will make my dwelling among you, and **my soul shall not abhor** you.”
Leviticus 26:11

“Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he **loved him as his own soul**.” 1 Samuel 18:3

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

The soul is connected to our emotional center, our affections.

- iii. The **might** of a person is their ability, their action.

“Reuben, you are my firstborn, my **might**, and the firstfruits of my **strength**, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in **power**.” Genesis 49:3

“But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your **might** from among them...” Numbers 14:13

“Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving **might** of his right hand.” Psalm 20:6

There is an intense physicality to this part of a person. This is your body, your action in the world.

- d. With all their heart, soul and might, the people are responding the Law of God with the entirety of their being, not just their mind, not merely their feelings, not only their actions, but a cohesive whole person that understands the gravity of a holy God. They are learning what it means to love God, and in the midst of it, they grieve.

And They Grieved, they weren't celebrating, they were mourning. (v 9)

Why? Because the Holy God who created the universe, who willed everything into existence had been revealed to them in and through scripture, and that, in turn, reveals their unfaithfulness to God, their sin.

James reminds us that if anyone is a hearer and not a 'doer' "he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like." (James

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

2:23-24) Studying the Word of the Lord gives us a mirror to understand ourselves.

Do you love God? With your whole being? Each of us has tendencies and traits that cause us to neglect loving God with our whole selves.

- i. When you encounter the unfathomable nature of God, does it excite and enliven your **mind**? Does it cause you to seek to understand and know the Lord more? Or does it bore you? I'm not suggesting that you should be the next John Piper, Martin Luther or Augustine, I'm simply saying that if you aren't engaging your mind with the Gospel then your love for God is lacking. God demands your mental abilities, no matter what you may or may not be gifted with. You may have a Ph.D. and you may not have graduated high school. {Story about Larry}
1. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight {understanding, NASB}. Proverbs 9:9-10 ESV
- ii. When you see the beauty of God, does it move your affections? Does it penetrate your heart?

Psalm 27:4 "One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the **beauty** of the LORD and to inquire in his temple."

You may not be an emotional person, even so your emotions are part of who you are. Are they affected by the radical love which God has given you in the Gospel?

"Never was a natural man engaged earnestly to seek his salvation;

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

never were any such brought to cry after wisdom, and lift up their voice for understanding, and to wrestle with God in prayer for mercy; and never was one humbled, and brought to the foot of God, from anything that ever he heard or imagined of his own unworthiness and deserving of God's displeasure; nor was ever one induced to fly for refuge unto Christ, while his heart remained unaffected.” - Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*

Are your emotions affected by the Gospel?

- iii. Does the call of God move you to obedience? Or do you not value the commands of God?

We already quoted James 2, but let's look at those verses in context: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

James 1:22-27

Your obedience is part of who you are. Are you quick to obey the call of God, not for salvation's sake, but because the one who asks you is God himself?

- e. If we're honest, we each fail to love God with our whole selves, with complete love. But God loved us with the most complete love that the world has ever known. God loved us beyond what we will ever be capable of.

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

- i. Jesus loved with a deep understanding
- ii. Jesus loved us with great affections
- iii. Jesus loved us in the greatest action ever taken.

- iv. “For God so *loved* the world...” This is a **whole** love, not merely intellectual or emotional or obedience, but all three bound together. This is **REAL** love.

2. Our Mourning Shall Turn To Dancing

As the people of God are grieving in this sin, and Nehemiah and Ezra call the people to stop grieving and to start rejoicing and the elders of the people have a Bible Study and they determine that they are supposed to keep the feast of Tabernacles.

This may seem particularly odd, because we don't think about the festivals very much as New Testament Christians, but it's an important point. Let's look at how this connects to how God has just revealed himself to the people, and what he's trying to teach them through this feast.

- a. Overview of the Feasts (Leviticus 23)
 - i. Pesach - Passover - The passing over of the first-born of Israel, and the death of the passover lamb
 - ii. Unleavened Bread - Chag Hamotzi - Waiting on the Lord to lead them out of Egypt, thus no time for leaven to rise
 - iii. First Fruits - Bikkurim - a giving of the first fruits of the labors of the people to God
 - iv. Pentecost - Shavout - The giving of the Law
 - v. Trumpets - Rosh Hashanah - The beginning of the new year
 - vi. Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur - the day to atone for the sins of Israel
 - vii. Tabernacles - Sukkot
The Final Feast
- b. Why the feast of Tabernacles?

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

- i. Leviticus 23:43 says “...that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt...” (Leviticus 23:43) Picture this for a moment. The people of God have effectively rebuilt the city, their homes, the walls and have begun good work on the Temple, and God commands them, through the book of Leviticus, to camp outside of their houses. They are to build temporary shacks in which to live and eat in for a week. Perhaps you’re like me and you enjoy camping, being outside, hanging in a hammock. Even so, we all know people whose idea of camping is building a fire in their backyard and then going to sleep on their Tempurpedic mattress. God was pressing in on his people. He was reminding them that “This wall, these homes, these accomplishments that you have brought, are temporary. You are still sojourners and exiles.” He’s reminding them to depend upon himself. Have you experienced a time like this in your own life? A time when everything you put your mind and energy to seems to go wrong? Is God making you pitch a tent and recognize that everything you value is merely temporary? Perhaps that’s your health, your job accolades, your lack of a job, strife in your marriage. Ask yourself, “How is God teaching me to rely on him and look to the future rather than to our own accomplishments and works?” God is reorienting your joy to be directed towards what He has done rather than what you have done. This is a joy that sustains in spite of current circumstance. This is a lasting, everlasting, joy of the Lord. Why? Because the Lord was with them in exile and brought them back and he is with them even now amidst opposition and oppression.
- ii. The feast of Tabernacles represents a tension for the people of God to live into: Just as God tabernacled with Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness,
 1. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Exodus 40:34

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

- iii. just as God was reminding the people of Israel with Ezra and Nehemiah that the was with them and their sojourning was not over,
- iv. just as God tabernacled through the coming of Christ as a baby with us,
 - 1. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14
- v. just as he makes us tabernacles of the indwelling Holy Spirit now,
 - 1. “Or do you not know that your body's a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own...” 1 Cor 6:19
- vi. so there is a day when the King will come to stay. There is a day when Christ will return, when the Temple will descend, and God will forever be with his people. And on that day, you will not mourn, but you will dance. You will not feel sorrow, but you will be filled with joy.
 - 1. “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” 1 Thess 4:16-17
 - 2. Ezekiel 43:7
 - 3. Revelation 21:22
- c. Joy Is Coming
 - i. Psalm 30:11 - Salvation Joy
 - 1. You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
you have loosed my sackcloth
and clothed me with gladness,
 - ii. Isaiah 61:1-3 - Future Joy
 - 1. The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me

Nehemiah 8: Finding Joy in the Journey

to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

**to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.**

iii. Jeremiah 31:13 - Future Joy

1. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.

I will turn their mourning into joy;

I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

- ### iv. When you experience God through the person of Christ in scripture, you're going to know grief of sin and the grief of the world around you. But you are not meant to stay there. Nehemiah said, "The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength." Where do you find your strength today? You may be feeling the weight of your sin, because you don't love God fully. None of us do, but praise be to God that he has so loved us that there is day coming when all sorrow, sin, grief, distress and doubt will be laid aside and the Lord will be here. We look forward to that day together, and, today, no matter what you're carrying with you, be it the sorrow of the world or the the grief of sin, God is here with us to remind us that HE IS GREATER, HE IS STRONGER, HE IS BETTER and HE IS COMING.