

And Now A Word From Our Sponsors Nehemiah 8:1-9:3

Robyn and I want to thank you for praying for us while away. We were blessed to hear wonderful speakers. It was incredible to be among about a thousand people all singing in praise to the Lord.

One of the speakers was a former astronaut who had been on nine different space missions to the international space station. He showed some amazing pictures that he took in space.

The theme of the conference centered around the authority of God's Word and how important it is to stand on that Word in an ever-changing culture that wants to undermine His authority and challenge His Word to us. It was the very first question raised in the Bible in the Garden of Eden that challenged the authority of God. That challenge is found in **Genesis 3:1** in the question raised by the Serpent when he boldly asked Eve **"did God really say?"** When we begin to question His authority, we begin to question everything He has said. Since then, mankind has uttered that very same question as a challenge to the authority of God on so many areas whether it's about the sanctity of life, marriage, homosexuality, gender identity and other issues. With the challenge of authority comes the same response Satan gave Eve **"you can become like God"** and become your own authority.

So when we come to our passage in **Nehemiah 8**, the reason Judah is in the predicament they are in is for that very reason. They took the subtle bait and decided that they wanted to govern themselves as they saw fit and leave God out, to question His authority over them by following other gods rather than obey the commands He had given them in the law to have no other gods before them. Essentially, they didn't like God telling them how to live. They wanted to do their own thing.

Does that sound familiar? It should because that's the direction America has taken. We've cast Him out of virtually every aspect of culture because it doesn't like Him telling us how we should live and so people have become their own gods taking a

page out of the book of Judges where **"every man did what was right in his own eyes."** To their own demise, people have thrown off the authority of God and sad to say, that includes many churches and people who claim to be Christians. **"Has God really said?"** They want a Bible that is fluid and ever-changing based on cultural norms and mores, one that isn't dogmatic and authoritative.

For abdicating the authority of God's Word and doing their own thing, God brought judgment on the people of Israel and thrust them into captivity. The northern 10 tribes were the first to experience God's judgment when He used the Assyrians to capture them in 722 B.C. and then about 130 years later in 586 B.C. He did the same with the southern two tribes when Babylon conquered them.

During the reign of Cyrus of Persia, God laid it on the heart of this pagan king to allow Jews to return to their homeland. Among the early pilgrims to return was Ezra, a scribe and priest. Under his leadership, he not only helped in the restoration of the Temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, he was also there to teach the law of God, to reestablish His authority in the people to adhere to His law once again. It was a time of national confession for past sins that resulted in the predicament they found themselves in. Fourteen years later Nehemiah heard from some Jews who had returned to Babylon that the city was still in shambles. While the Temple had been rebuilt, the walls of the city still lay in ruins. It really bothered him to the point that king Artaxerxes asked him what was wrong. Remember that he was the cup bearer to the king. He wasn't just a waiter to the king; it was an important and trusted position that required utmost loyalty. Long story short, after Nehemiah described that the city of his homeland still lay in ruins, the king gave him permission to return and see to the reconstruction of the wall.

Let me just pause here and ask this question for consideration. **As we look around at the chaos of what is happening in our own country, does it move us to do something about it?** The mess our nation is in has a direct correlation to its abandonment of the

authority of God's Word.

I want to suggest to you that building the wall was not the primary outcome of Nehemiah's return. Yes, the wall was rebuilt, but as we will see in our chapter, I think the real success in his work was in rebuilding the lives of these people on the authority of God's Word. **Chapter 8** is all about the importance of God's Word as it was read and explained to them which resulted in repentance and obedience. When we realize the authority of God's Word it will have an impact in our lives.

If you had infants in your home as parents or grandparents, you invariably played peekaboo with them. It was a simple game. You would cover your face with your hands or a blanket and then move your hands and say peekaboo. You could pretend you weren't there when in reality you were in plain sight. That's what people want to do with the authority of God's Word. Even though His authority and His Word are in plain sight, they want to pretend it isn't there so they can do what they want.

Most of us remember the early days of TV when an announcer would cut in and say "and now a word from our sponsor" and then it would go to a commercial. God has cut in with a word to the people of Israel who have returned. Notice their assembly to hear the Word of God.

I. THEIR ASSEMBLY TO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD – v. 1

The first thing we see is their meeting place.

A. Their Meeting Place – v. 1a

Some scholars estimate the gathering to be around 30,000 people. They're all gathered in the square known as the Water Gate. Now it's not the same place of political scandal under President Nixon. This gate was one of the primary gates located on the east side of the wall that surrounded Jerusalem and was near the Kidron Valley and was restored by Nehemiah. Because it was near the Gihon Spring, it was likely the gate through which they brought water into the Temple that was required during the Festival of Tabernacles. The Water Gate is a picture

of God's Word and its effect on our lives. We read in **Ephesians 5:25-26** "**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with the water through the word.**"

In **John 15:3** Jesus told the disciples they were clean through the word He had spoken to them.

Psalm 119:9, 11 states that it is through the Word of God that we are cleansed so that we don't sin.

In **John 7:37-39** Jesus invites people to believe in Him and drink the living water He provides. We learn from that passage that water was a picture of the Holy Spirit who would come on those who believed in Christ.

Throughout history we have seen the great effect God's Word has had in the cleansing of people who hear the Word and respond in repentance. People like John Bunyan, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, George Whitefield, William Carey, D.L. Moody, Charles Spurgeon and in our day Billy Graham and so many others have mightily preached the authority of the Word of God that has resulted in the cleansing power of so many people. It wasn't their word; it was God's Word that they proclaimed that had such an impact.

There is significance for their assembly at the Water Gate. It was symbolic of the Word of God they were about to hear.

Notice next their messenger.

B. Their Messenger – v. 1b

Ezra now takes center stage as the people request that he read from the Law of Moses. When he returned to Jerusalem 14 years earlier, the spiritual condition of the Jews was appalling. He was the ideal person to read God's Word: **Ezra 7:10** "**For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.**"

He played a primary role in helping Israel get back on track spiritually and so the people ask him to

keep teaching them. From his devotion to the Word of God, he was the best person for the job. This church has been blessed with pastors who are committed to be faithful to the study and delivery of God's Word and I'm confident that will be your desire as you prayerfully seek the next pastor. Make sure you find one who adheres to the authority of all God's Word. When one part is compromised, it's easy over time to compromise in other areas. Ezra accurately handled the Word as he taught. He was faithful to his calling and the Word.

Tony Evans writes "Ezra had been preaching for 14 years, creating a spiritual environment, softening the ground with truth, and orienting the people toward a standard." That standard was built on the authority of the Word. "Thus saith the Lord" is not something that is open for debate or change.

I cannot stress the importance of assembling regularly to hear the Word of God proclaimed so that it will impact your walk with God.

We next come to their attentiveness in hearing the Word of God.

II. THEIR ATTENTIVENESS IN HEARING THE WORD OF GOD – vv. 2-6

Two women were walking out of church after the service and one said "My, that preacher certainly preaches a long time." The other responded by saying, "No, it just seems like a long time."

Just in case you think my sermons are lengthy, Zach Zehnder of the Cross Church in Mount Dora, FL set a world record for the longest sermon. The 31-year-old pastor delivered a 53 hour and 18 minute sermon with the help of 200 pages of notes and more than 600 PowerPoint slides that began on Friday and ended at 12:18 p.m. Sunday. His sermon was an overview of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. And just so you know, the congregation was not there for the whole sermon. They scheduled people to be there at certain times.

Our text tells us that he read the Law for 6 hours from daybreak to noon. I see three things that are important when we hear the word.

They had an awareness of the Word.
They were attentive to the Word.
They were approving of the Word.

In other words, as James says, be doers of the Word and not just hearers only. (James 1:22)

A. They Had An Awareness of the Word – vv. 2-3a

Simply put, those who gathered had an understanding of the word. Now that doesn't mean they comprehended what was read. As we'll see in a moment the Levites were around explaining it to them. Instead, they had an awareness that what they were hearing was God's Word. I have to wonder how long it had been since some of them had heard the law read. It used to be in our country that even if people didn't go to church, there was still had an awareness of what the Bible said. That's not the case today. Many are illiterate when it comes to what the Bible says. Others just flat out reject it. The people who gathered had an awareness of God's Word. But they also had an attentiveness to the Word.

B. They Were Attentive To The Word – v. 3b

Being attentive doesn't begin in the mind, it begins in the heart. **Am I receptive to what it says? Do I listen with interest and eagerness? Is it asking me to make some changes in my life to conform to its teaching? Is there something it wants me to do?**

What does it say?

What does it mean?

What does it mean to me?

They were paying very close attention. We might say that it kept them on the edge of their seats.

Martin Lloyd-Jones stated that "the primary task of the church and of Christian ministers is the preaching of the Word of God. The decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching had declined." In other words, as the preaching goes, so goes the people. There must be public proclamation that results in private application of the Word.

Alexander MacLaren rightly states that "He who

does not intend to keep the law does not wish to know the law. If we have no longing to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure that we prefer our own [will] to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire to understand the Book which contains so much of it.”

This attentiveness led to their approval of the Word.

C. Their Approval Of The Word Of God – vv. 4-6

First it was a time of wonder.

1. It was a time of wonder – vv. 4-5

We can think that building a platform was a way for more people to see Ezra over the crowd. I believe they built the platform because they valued the Word of God. They wanted to exalt it. I say that because when Ezra opened the Book and began to read that all the people stood, and the implication is that they stood for the entire six hours.

We were visiting Dad’s church once and I noticed in the back a man with an interesting habit. After church I asked Dad about him. He said that he visits from time to time. Every time the pastor read a Scripture passage he would stand. Every time. His was a great reverence for the Word of God. Do we value the Word of God with such respect? When the Word of God is treated casually, it is no wonder many don’t hold the Bible with respect nor consider it authoritative.

When God’s Word was opened, it was a time of awe, a time of reverence, a time of wonder. But it was also a time of worship.

2. It was a time of worship – v. 6

Notice three different ways they responded when Ezra praised the Lord.

First, they lifted their hands.

Second, they shouted Amen.

Third, they bowed down in worship.

These are all attitudes of the heart.

Lifting their hands with palms up is an indication of their readiness to receive what the Word said. “I’m here. I’m ready to hear. I’m ready to respond.”

I know some of you like to raise your hands when

we sing. You keep on doing it. I’m going to admit that I’m a closet hand raiser. I guess I’m worried about what people might think so I do what we called in Bible college the Baptist salute. We stuff our hands in our pockets lest they might become filled with helium and float above our heads. To that I say, shame on me for not letting my body do what my spirit wants in worshipping the Lord, for being more concerned about what others think than what God requires of us – hearts expressing desire to hear. Raising hands doesn’t mean we’ve gone out on the loony limb, but is instead an expression of worship that says to the Lord “I’m here and I’m ready to receive what You have to say to me. My heart is receptive to Your Word. Fill me up.” So let’s not be afraid or ashamed to express our readiness to receive what God has for us lifting up holy hands.

It is not to be coerced but done voluntarily as an expression of worship. Pastor John Piper writes “Either it comes from the heart and is valuable as an expression of the heart, or it is a performance and has no worship value at all.”

Second, they shouted Amen! It’s a word that is sometimes translated verily, truly, or let it be so. It expresses solemn ratification of something that has just been said or to give strong approval or agreement to what God’s Word says.

Their third act of approval is evident in that they bowed low in worship.

There was utmost reverence for the Lord and His Word, so much so that they prostrated themselves, which was a sign of humility. It acknowledged His authority over them and their subservience to Him. He was their King; they were His subjects. Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego defied the order of Nebuchadnezzar because they would only bow to one king. Peter and John defied the order of the Sanhedrin not to preach about Jesus because they would only bow to one king.

Why do we bow our heads when we pray? It’s out of reverence and humility. When we hear the Word of God, do we bow our heart before the Sovereign

God who has authority over us?

Their hearts were attentive to the Word of God. As we continue in our passage, notice third their attitude after hearing the Word of God.

III. THEIR ATTITUDE AFTER HEARING THE WORD OF GOD – 8:7-12; 9:1-3

In **verses 7-8** we see that they were receptive to the Word of God.

A. They Were Receptive To The Word God – vv. 7-8

Some scholars suggest that it was read in one translation and then translated in another so they could hear it in their language. Other scholars suggest, and what I believe, is that as Ezra read the Law, there was a pause so that these 13 Levites could go out among the crowd and provide some clarity and meaning to what was read. In other words, they provided some commentary by interpreting it for them so they could both understand and obey it. The people didn't just want to hear it read, they wanted to know what it meant and how it applied to them.

Imagine how long a service would take if we did that. It would be like having our deacons scattered out in the audience so that as I preached, they would give some instruction and application.

Acts 17:11 tells us that the Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians because when they heard Paul preach, they didn't just take what he said as true. It says they searched the Scriptures to verify that what he said was right. Be receptive to hearing the Word and to its instruction from others, but be a diligent student of the Word yourself. And when you are receptive to the Word with a right heart attitude, the Word of God will always have an effect on you. It had such an effect that their response was one of remorse.

B. They Were Remorseful Because Of The Word Of God – 8:9a; 9:1-3

I've heard it said that when Johnathan Edwards

delivered his sermon "*Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God*" that he read every word, never looked up from his notes and spoke in a monotone voice. Yet, many who were there hearing the message, began to cry out and fall to the ground in utter remorse over their sins. It became the catalyst for the first great awakening in our nation.

Reverend Stephen Williams wrote in his diary an account of what he observed regarding the reactions of the congregation during and after the sermon. "Before the sermon was done there was a great moaning and crying out through the whole house — "What shall I do to be saved?" "Oh, I am going to hell!" "Oh what shall I do for a Christ?" and so forth — so that the minister was obliged to desist. The shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing. After some time of waiting, the congregation were still, so that a prayer was made by Mr. Wheelock, and after that we descended from the pulpit and discoursed with the people, some in one place and some in another. And amazing and astonishing: the power of God was seen and several souls were hopefully wrought upon that night, and oh the cheerfulness and pleasantness of their countenances that received comfort. Oh that God would strengthen and confirm their new faith! We sang a hymn and prayed, and dispersed the assembly."

Oh, that we would have that same response of remorse in our day, in our nation.

Nehemiah describes the same kind of response when the Law was read and explained. People were filled with remorse and confessed their sins. Let me just say that before we pray about our nation being filled with remorse and moved to conviction and confession, we should begin with our own time of remorse and confession over our sin. They wept over their own sin when they realized that the reason for their captivity was because of disobedience to God's Word.

Does our reading or hearing God's Word move us to have remorse for our sin?

But Ezra told them to dry their eyes because instead of a day of mourning it was a day of rejoicing. So let me add one more thing: ***True confession will***

always result in true celebration.

C. They Were Rejoicing About The Word Of God – vv. 8b-12

When we hear the Word of God with a right heart attitude it should result in celebration.

1. The Word of God brings celebration

If you take some time to read through **Psalm 119**, you will discover the joy of God's Word.

Psalm 119:1b-2 “Blessed are they who walk according to the law of the Lord. Blessed are they who keep His statutes and seek Him with all their heart.”

v. 7 “I will praise You with an upright heart as I learn Your righteous laws.”

v. 14 “I rejoice in following Your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.”

v. 16 “I delight in Your decrees; I will not neglect Your Word.”

v. 24 “Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors.”

v. 97 “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.”

v. 103 “How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”

Jeremiah 15:16 is one of my favorites: “Thy Words were found, and I did eat them, and they became to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart.”

As I said a moment ago, true repentance will lead to true celebration when we understand that our sins are forgiven and are no longer under God's wrath.

Rejoice, ye pure in heart;
Rejoice, give thanks and sing.
Your festal banner wave on high –
The cross of Christ, your King.

Rejoice,
Rejoice,
Rejoice, give thanks and sing.

Confession of our sin should bring celebration from the heart.

Franz Joseph Haydn wrote “my heart is so full that the notes dance and leap from my pen and since God has given me a cheerful heart, it will be pardoned me that I serve Him with a cheerful spirit.” Let's remove the lemon juice and sour faces and celebrate with joyfulness.

Their celebration about the Word of God included a time of cheerfulness.

a. It was a time of cheerfulness

They were told to be filled with joy and to go celebrate with a feast. Instead of mourning, **verse 10** says they were to “Let the joy of the Lord be your strength.”

The word “**strength**” refers to a stronghold, something that lifts us above our trials. One author noted that “It is the state of gladness and rejoicing that comes from knowing and trusting God.”

Joy should be the natural result of the Christian faith because of our trust in the Lord. This kind of joy doesn't mean that we are supposed to have some kind of la-la attitude about life, one that doesn't have any problems. Instead when we face trials, we can still have joy because we have placed our full confidence in God to whom we belong. **James 1:2** reminds us to “consider it pure joy, whenever you face trials of many kinds.”

This kind of joy takes away our fear because we trust the Lord with all our heart. Alexander MacLaren notes “Joy that is in Christ is deep and abiding. Faith in Him naturally works gladness.”

A second thing about this kind of joy is that it is a command. We are told in **Philippians 4:4** to “rejoice in the Lord always.” This kind of joy comes even in trials when we look to Christ in faith instead of looking at the circumstances. Someone said that if joy is the result of faith, then sadness is the result of doubt and despair. We need to change the perception that being a Christian is one of gloom and sadness. Yes, there is a time of remorse, but we of all people should be filled with joy

because we have so much to be joyful about. That kind of joy gives us the kind of strength we need when we face all kinds of trials. For joy to be pure, it can't be mixed with doubt or fear.

Not only was it to be a time of cheerfulness but also a time of charity.

b. It was a time of charity – v. 10a

Verse 10 tells us that they were to share food and drink with others who didn't have anything with which to celebrate. Everyone was to be included in this joyful occasion. No one was to be left out. If someone didn't have anything, they were to give them some of what they had. It reminds me of **Acts 2:42-47**.

Cheerfulness is a time of charity.
Let me close with this.

D. They Were Responding To The Word of God – vv. 13-18

First, they responded with their hands.

1. They obeyed the Word of God with their hands by observing the feast

Second, they responded with their heart.

2. They obeyed the Word of God with their heart by celebrating with joy

This festival and these booths were reminders of the wilderness travels when the Israelites lived in temporary shelters, but they were also to be reminders of how God daily and faithfully provided for them. They had nothing and God took care of them. Their celebration wasn't because of the shelters, but because of their renewed obedience to God's Word. It was a time to look back at the wandering and God's provision, to look around at God's blessings, and to look forward to God's kingdom.

God has given us His Word. When we hear it, there should be a time of confession, but it should also be a time of celebration.

How will we respond to the authority of God's Word?