

# **NEHEMIAH**

Part 6: “Renewed by the Word of God”

Nehemiah 8:1–4a; 8–12

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## **Scripture Reading**

*“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. 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. 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. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.... ‘They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 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. 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.’ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.’ 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” (Nehemiah 8:1–4a; 8–12).*

## **Introduction**

This fall, at Redeemer, we have been studying the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. It is a story of physical restoration and spiritual revival. It is a story that we have been laying on top of our own lives as we seek to be a people who love our city and faithfully represent the kingdom of Christ to a watching world.

The time of exile has ended, and the Jewish people have recently returned to their Promise Land. However, the Holy City of Jerusalem lies vulnerable and exposed to outside threats.

Into this situation comes Nehemiah, one of the greatest leaders of the Old Testament. He is a deeply prayerful and selfless man who unites the people of God to rebuild Jerusalem’s city walls despite extraordinary opposition.

Last week, at the conclusion of our text, we witnessed the completion of the building project. The broken walls and burnt-down gates have been restored. However, the story is not over, and the mission has not been accomplished.

Nehemiah has now led Jerusalem through the process of physical renewal. But for the remaining chapters of this book, he will now focus on the *spiritual* renewal of Jerusalem. And this spiritual renewal begins with and flows from the word of God.

The title of today's sermon is "Renewed by the Word of God." And for the rest of our time today we are going to talk about how the word of God brings spiritual renewal in four ways: 1.) *The Word of God Brings about Clarity*, 2.) *The Word of God Brings about Conviction*, 3.) *The Word of God Brings about Confession*, and 4.) *The Word of God Brings about Covenant Renewal*.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) The Word of God Brings about Clarity**

After the wall is rebuilt, the people of Judah are gathered in a sacred assembly within the city gates [show 1Ezra Reads the Law]. Ezra, the scribe, stands upon an elevated wooden platform. He unrolls the Law of Moses, and he begins to read the words of Scripture from early morning to midday.

We often take our easy access to the words of Scripture for granted. We have multiple, wonderful English translations of the Bible easily available in print, on the internet, and through smartphone apps. But there are many places in the world now, and there have been many times in history when God's people have *not* had easy access to God's word.

So, what is happening in Nehemiah 8 is profound. The Jewish people have been in exile for decades. And before that time, the kingdom of Judah had been in a long period of spiritual decline wherein the word of God was minimized, ignored, and mistaught.

But now, the people of God are hearing the words of Scripture, some of them for the first time in their lives. They are being told the story of their sacred history that had been neglected and forgotten for generations. The people of God are being reconnected to the word of God.

The word of God is central to the renewal of the people of God. God's word spoke the cosmos into existence. God's word promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob a Promise Land. God's word delivered Israel from slavery and constituted them as a holy nation. God's word spoke through the prophets of a coming messiah. And when Jesus, our messiah, came into this world, died and rose again, God's word gave his church a mission to go and make disciples of all nations.

The church is created and constituted by the word of God, and for this reason, we need the word to renew us day by day, week by week.

When we read and meditate on the words of Scripture, God renews us. When we gather together and we have Scripture read over us and proclaimed to us, the Holy Spirit forms and shapes us through his word. God's word renews our calling. God's word reminds us of our identity in Christ. God's word binds us together in community. God's word gives focus and *clarity* to our mission.

We need God's word.

Now, to make that truth claim in 2021 is much more controversial than it was for most of human history. The notion that we can know truth through inspired divine revelation is a hotly contested idea in our culture today. Our culture prefers forms of truth that depend on human rationality. We like truth that we can put under a microscope and manage through our own ingenuity. We are increasingly allergic to the notion that God can and does speak to us through his word. And that is because if God speaks to us, his words have authority over us.

Our culture is suspicious of authority. We value individualism and independence. But there are times when our individualism and independence lead us into self-deception and destruction. As the book of Proverbs reminds us, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death"* (Prov 14:12). And also, *"Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment"* (Prov 18:1).

In a time when it has never been easier to read books and blogs and articles and watch videos that do nothing but confirm our own biases—that do nothing but validate what we want to be true—we need the truth of God's inspired word. We need an authority outside of ourselves to stand in authority over us and bring clarity where we have been stumbling in error.

It is notable that when Ezra reads the word of God to the people of Jerusalem, he speaks from an elevated platform, and the people stand to hear the words that are spoken: *"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"* (Neh 8:5).

This is why throughout Christian history, the word of God is often read from and spoken from a platform that is elevated above the congregation. It is a visual way of acknowledging the authority of God's word *over* us. For the same reason we also stand for the reading of God's word. We are saying with our bodies that God's thoughts are to be honored and respected as belonging to a different category than our thoughts.

This is why we must come before God's word with humility. *We are not to study God's word through the lens of ourselves; rather we are to study ourselves through the lens of God's word.*

The words of culture are powerful, and they are pressing in upon us at all times. The world offers us many different stories through which we might understand our lives. But the word of Scripture recalibrates us to living in light of God and in light of his redeeming work in history.

## 2.) The Word of God Brings Conviction

There are a few clues in this chapter that Old Testament scholars have picked up on that indicate that Ezra is reading the entirety of the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is, of course, a major part of the law of Moses. It contains specific instructions for how the people of God are to live and worship. But one of the most memorable parts of Deuteronomy is chapter 28, which outlines the blessings and curses of the covenant. In sum, God's people are promised blessing if they keep his law. Likewise, they will endure consequences and judgment if they break his law.

Now, for the first time in generations, the people of Jerusalem realize the reason they have suffered—the reason they lost their kingdom and went into exile—was because they had sinned against the law of God. As a result, they begin to feel conviction for their sin, and they grieve.

Look back at our text: *“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”* (Neh 8:9).

But Nehemiah and Ezra refuse to allow this conviction to leave the people of God in a place of despair. They have not called this assembly to have a nationwide pity party! And what they say would probably surprise most of us: *“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”* (Neh 8:10).

The word of God is a light that shines in the darkness (cf. 2 Cor 4:6). It is a living sword that pierces our hearts (cf. Heb 4:12). The word of God will expose us where we are weak. It will expose our need and our sin. Simply said, the word of God brings conviction.

Now, a lot of people have the wrong idea about conviction. We think it's a bad or shameful thing. We have this visceral reaction to run away from feeling like we have erred or done something wrong. So, we often want to minimize or ignore hard truth if it brings conviction to ourselves or our group.

But conviction is not an ill omen that brings despair. Rather it is a gift that brings greater joy

I think people get the wrong idea about conviction because they confuse it with condemnation. But conviction and condemnation are two very different things. Conviction says, “This is where you have gone wrong.” Condemnation says, “This is why you deserve to be punished.”

Through his word, the Holy Spirit has a continuing role in bringing about conviction in our hearts as the people of God. But he does not ever bring condemnation. Scripture announces: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom 8:1). We do not have to endure the weight of condemnation because Christ has already taken every bit of the penalty and punishment for our sin.

For this reason, if you have trusted Jesus for your salvation, you have nothing to fear from being convicted of your sin by the word of God. Conviction breaks the spell that self-deception holds over us. Conviction exposes how sin only leads us to sorrow and death. Conviction is simply the voice of your heavenly Father saying, “My child, that road will lead to pain. Let me show you a road that will lead to your joy!” Conviction is the first step of truth setting us free (cf. John 8:32).

### **3.) The Word of God Brings Confession**

The people of Jerusalem do not stop at conviction. They allow conviction to translate into action.

Almost immediately, they realize that there has been a feast that Moses commanded in the Law that had not been observed for generations. That feast was called the feast of booths (also known as the feast of tabernacles).<sup>1</sup>

Now, this was a feast that the people were to observe once a year. They would leave their homes and gather together and live inside tents for a week. During this time, people would worship. They would celebrate the harvest of the land. And they would remember that they were once a people who lived without a home in the wilderness. In this way, the feast of booths was designed to remind the people of God of how they were dependent upon him for everything.

Interestingly, even though this was a part of the law, the last time that the people of Israel observed this feast was during the time of Joshua (Neh 8:17). That was centuries ago when Israel first came into the Promise Land!

This shows us a haunting truth. It is easy to forget how much we need God when we are no longer desperate for him. It is easy to trivialize our worship of God when we are in a place of comfort and ease.

But the people of Jerusalem go a step further. They hold a sacred assembly, and they confess their own sins and the sins of their ancestors. Look briefly at the beginning of chapter 9: *“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers”* (Neh 9:1–2).

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<sup>1</sup> See: Exod 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:34–43; Num 29:12–40; Deut 16:13–15

Chapter 9, then, is mostly a sincere and heartfelt prayer to God of spiritual renewal. The people of God recount how faithful God has been to them. They recount all the ways Israel has sinned against God. And they confess their need for God.

The word of God suddenly gave the people of Jerusalem a sense of their place in history. They are now able to see themselves in continuity with the people of God from generations past. They are able to see that, as the people of God, they have a holy and distinct calling. But they are also able to see how prone the people of God have been toward sin and compromise.

For the same reason, this why I think it is crucial for us as the people of God today to know our history. We need to study the stories and histories of the Old Testament because their story is our story. The ways they were tempted to compromise are ways we are tempted to compromise today.

We need to pay attention to those moments in the Gospels when the disciples seem to misunderstand Jesus and get him wrong. The ways they were prone to misunderstand Jesus, we too, are prone to misunderstand Jesus today.

We need to read the letters of the New Testament so that we can see the struggles of the early church because those are the same struggles of the church today.

And when we see our own sin revealed in the pages of Scripture, we should be bold and courageous to confess our sins. We don't need to be afraid when we come before the throne of God in prayer. For those who trust Christ for their salvation, God's throne is not a throne of judgement but of grace. As the author of Hebrews says, *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"* (Heb 4:16).

That's why all throughout the history of the church, Christians have set aside time in our worship gatherings for corporate and private confession.

Again, don't misunderstand what the word confession means. Confession is not self-condemnation or self-punishment. Confession is laying the burden of our sins before a God who calls the heavy laden to come to him (Matt 11:28). Confession is coming into agreement with God about why we need his grace.

And many times, throughout church history, sincere, humble confession within the people of God is kindling for the fire of revival. Magnificent and supernatural things happen when we lay down our pride and pretense and humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God.

#### **4.) The Word of God brings Covenant Renewal**

All of this deep interaction with the word of God brings the people of Jerusalem to a decisive action—they must renew their covenant with God. Chapter 9 ends with these

words: *“Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests”* (Neh 9:38).

When God delivered the ancient people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, he brought them to a mountain called Sinai. And there, he made a covenant with them.

Now, the word “covenant” is an unfamiliar word for many people, but it is a very important word in the Bible. A covenant was essentially a sacred and sacrificial promise made between two parties. It was the most binding promise that a person could make.

When God delivered Israel, he promised—or covenanted—to be their God, to reveal himself to them, to dwell among them, and to faithfully defend and protect them. In turn, the nation of Israel was to live as a holy nation that would treasure the word of God and obey the commands of the Lord.

However, time and time again, instead of loving the God who had so faithfully loved them, they turned away from God. They trivialized God’s word and deprioritized his worship. They built a society where injustice was replete. They were seduced to worship the idols and false gods of the nations around them. And when this happened, God would remove his blessing from his people, and they would fall into suffering and eventually exile.

Now, here in Nehemiah, the people of God have seen their sin. They have confessed their sins and the sins of the generations who have gone before them. They have remembered their own story and they have borne witness to the faithfulness of God. And now, they will recommit themselves to the covenant that God made with them.

But when Christ came, he inaugurated a new and better covenant. Whereas the covenant with Israel marked the defeat of Pharaoh and deliverance from slavery, this new covenant church marks the defeat of death by the resurrection of Jesus! It commemorates that we are a people who are set free from the tyranny of sin!

That’s why, week after week, after we have heard the word of God declared to us and over us, we celebrate a covenant renewal ceremony. The name of that covenant renewal ceremony is “The Lord’s Supper.”

Every week we are reminded that Christ has died for our sin, that he is risen in victory, that—as the ascended Lord—he reigns over all rival powers, and he has promised to come again and make all things new. And in that moment, the Holy Spirit is faithful to minister to our hearts. He is able to help us taste and see that our Lord is good (Ps 34:8).

## **Conclusion**

We need the word of God and everything that flows from the word of God. The word of God renews us because, ultimately, the word of God does not merely lead us to truth. The word of God reveals the One who is truth.

The word of God reveals Jesus Christ, who is the word that became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory (John 1:14). Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3).

When we encounter the word of God—with spiritual eyes that have been unveiled by the Holy Spirit—we encounter Jesus, and we are transformed more and more into his image, from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18).

So, Redeemer, may we treasure God's holy word. May his word renew us day by day and form us to be a people who are faithful to our mission. May his word lead us evermore to Jesus, who is the founder and perfecter of our faith.

AMEN.

### **Discussion Starters for Gospel Community**

- 1.) Read Nehemiah 8:1–12. Summarize what is happening in this passage in your own words.
- 2.) After the physical restoration of the wall of God, why is it important for Nehemiah to focus on the spiritual restoration of the Jewish people? What role does the word of God—specifically the “Book of the Law”—have in the spiritual renewal of God's people?
- 3.) When the people hear the words of the law, their first response is to weep. But Nehemiah and Ezra command the people of God to rejoice and feast. Why should we rejoice when the word of God brings about conviction in our hearts?
- 4.) Chapter 9 largely focuses on a prayer of confession and covenant renewal? What do the terms confession and covenant renewal mean? Why are these important practices of Christian worship today?