

From Rubble to Return: Rebuilding From Word to Celebration

Nehemiah 8:1-12

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Please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or use the one on your device, and open up to Nehemiah chapter 8. If you've been with us throughout the Fall you've probably got a good idea where this is, if not you will find it just before Esther on page 347.

Now the book of Nehemiah is historical narrative. This means that it is a story about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem 2400 years ago. So there are people talking to each other and responding to situations. And that means unlike say the New Testament epistles, there are elements to the story of Nehemiah that don't apply to us.

For example, while you might like to be, very few of us work for kings as wine tasters. And while the Zettls are involved with masonry, I suspect even they have never rebuild the walls of a city – right? These aspects of the story are descriptive – they just describe the historical setting that Nehemiah was writing in.

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But just because this is a story about life on the other side of the world a long time ago doesn't mean it isn't God's word for FGBC today. And we know this because all Scripture is "God-breathed"¹ – which means while Nehemiah wrote this, it was actually inspired by God – whatever form that took. But it is because the infinite God of the universe is behind this that it still speaks today. This is the miracle of Scripture.

So Nehemiah isn't just descriptive, it is also prescriptive for us. It tells us how we are to live if we are going to please God.

So in chapter 1 we watched as Nehemiah's heart broke for people who were far away and in a totally different socioeconomic position from himself. And we said this wasn't just Nehemiah, this is for us.

Jesus says "You are the light of the world."² But if we are going to reflect His light to those He has placed us beside then we have to be people who don't just think about ourselves and what we want. We need to be a people whose hearts break for the needs and preferences of those who aren't exactly like us.

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Now this is true for all Christians of all time, but as we have been looking at this I've been amazed – and maybe you have as well – at how this corresponds to where we find ourselves as a church today. And I didn't plan this.

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

² Matthew 5:14

So right now we are working through issues surrounding music preferences. And when music is the topic there is a huge potential for people to get worked up, because music is so full of partiality. In a church with 120 people there are 120 different opinions about what makes up great music. Now certainly the more similar you are with the person sitting beside you the more likely it is that your preferences will be similar with theirs. But the message of Christ, as brought to us in Nehemiah, is that to image God we must let go of having things our way and put the preferences of others first.

So ultimately it doesn't matter what any of us want, because worship is about what God wants. And God's preference for music isn't tied to the 21st century or the 16th century or the 4th century BC. And He doesn't prefer rock over country or traditional over contemporary – all these distinctions are our own. But God loves worship that comes out of a heart that has been conformed to His image – in other words a heart like Nehemiah's that has chosen to die to itself and think of others first.

And the Scriptures are full of this, but just for example in Hebrews we read:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess His name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

So God wants not just that we use our lips to worship, but He wants the way we live with each other to line up with our lips. That's worship that pleases Him.

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Moving forward we looked at how Nehemiah prayed, and we said there is prescription here for us as well.

So if we are going to have a relationship with God we need to give Him both our quality and our quantity time. You experienced husbands understand this: If I said "Nikki we aren't going on dates, all you are going to get of me is whatever comes up throughout the day" – the couch is going to have my name on it! But at the same time if she came to me crying and said: "Hey I need to talk," and I said "Let's connect next Thursday on date night," that isn't going to work out for me either. Important relationships need set aside time for communication and spontaneous connection, and it's the same with our relationship with God.

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Now If you want to take a step forward here we have a couple opportunities for you. So I would encourage you to take part in the prayer vigil that is going to happen here this Friday from 8 to 8. Sign up with Gwen after the service for an hour of your choice. Or come out Tuesday morning for 30 minutes at 7am. Or join our pre-service prayer at 10:10 every Sunday. But do something to increase your intimacy with God.

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But why pray? I mean God knows everything already, why do we have to pray about it?

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Nehemiah showed us that the reason we pray – or one reason – is that prayer opens our eyes to see what God is doing and where He is at work. So when Nehemiah asked

King Artaxerxes to let him rebuild the walls of a city that had been a thorn in the Babylonian kingdom for decades and he agreed, Nehemiah had the eyes to see this wasn't coincidence. He said "Because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests."³

So if you want to see God working in your life, and through the life of this church, then give yourself to prayer for the increase of His kingdom. Come out and pray.

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Next Nehemiah got to work. White collared, soft fingered, wine tasting Nehemiah headed off the Jerusalem and started organizing peasants and passing on his vision and inspiring people to see God at work. He planned and he strategized and he threw himself into doing everything he could in order to push his God given vision forward. And he started packing rocks and mortar.

And this wasn't just some nice thing for Nehemiah – this is for us. There isn't an option for some disciples just to pray – all of us are to give ourselves to prayer and action.

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If you are in a Care Group and are reading Mark Buchanan's "The Holy Wild" you may remember the story he tells about a missionary in Brazil. He says:

"Driving through the Christmas traffic, fighting the drizzling rain, I chanced upon a four-year-old little girl. She was wet and cold and shaking. Her clothes were ragged, her hair was matted, and her nose was running. She walked between the cars at the stoplight, washing headlights because she was too short to wash windshields. A few gave her coins, others honked at her to get away from their vehicles.

As I drove away only some fifty cents poorer, I raged at God for the injustice in the world that allowed the situation. "God, how could you stand by, helpless?" Later that evening, God came to me softly with that still small voice and responded not in like kind to my rage, but with tenderness. "I have done something. I created you."⁴

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I don't know about you, but that story gets me. I get angry when I hear of injustice like that, but then I get convicted right along with that missionary as I realize that I'm the answer God has ordained to fight the evil I hate. But it's not just pastors and missionaries who face this. The Bible says a pastor's job is actually to inspire and empower the rest of God's people to see themselves as God's answer to the world's problems. So Ephesians says:

And [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, **to equip the saints for the work of ministry**, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13 ESV)

³ Nehemiah 2:8

⁴ In Mark Buchanan's "The Holy Wild" (Colorado Springs: Multnomah books), 2003. Pg 86-87

In other words, what happens here Sunday morning isn't "ministry" and I'm not a "minister". Every Christian was created for ministry. All of us are to bring the fullness of Christ into every situation we enter. And when that happens Christ heals the world through us.

So Nehemiah's concern for others unlike himself, and his prayer and his action are all prescriptive for us.

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Now with all this as a foundation let's continue today with Nehemiah chapter 8 starting in verse 1.

[Read Nehemiah 7:73b - 8:3]

Ezra was the High Priest that King Artaxerxes sent back with Nehemiah to teach everyone about God. And here he read and expounded the word for six hours – dawn till noon. So I've got five hours and forty minutes left – hang in there and listen attentively. Because Ezra's service didn't end when he finished preaching. Look at verse 4.

[Read Nehemiah 8:4-8]

Man, this is a "church service!" And there's prescription here. Some people say it's not important to gather with other believers since we can read the Bible and listen to podcasts on our own. But as long as we have been the people of God we have been gathering together. It happened at Mound Sinai, it happened in front of the Tabernacle and the Temple, it happened in Synagogues. And then in the New Testament it happened in small groups in houses and big groups in courtyards. Right from the beginning we have been a people who come together -this is who we are. So we need to be careful before we throw this out. It's like a tiger becoming a vegetarian, there are going to be complications.

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And I love the picture Nehemiah gives us of this prescriptive service. It's interactive. People's hands are shooting up. And they are yelling "amen!" They are blessing God. And maybe when they came to the part about Haman there was some booing and hissing. But they are completely engaged mind, soul and body. When Ezra read the Word they responded as whole beings.

Now there's something here that is challenging for those of us who've grown up in a culture that is a bit more stoic. And I get this. I'm a Hoffman so I was born with my feet planted in the ground and my elbows glued to my sides. I must have some French in me because my hands flail a bunch, but I dance like a piece of plywood.

And so there is a challenge here for me and those like me. The Biblical picture is that our bodies need to line up with our words. We don't just offer sacrifices of praise with our lips,⁵ we offer our bodies as living sacrifices.⁶ So if there is joy in our hearts then it

⁵ Hebrews 13:15

needs to show up on our faces – when you sing think about this. And if there is awareness of how great God is and how needy of Him we are then it needs to show up with raised hands and maybe bent knees.

Now this idea is uncomfortable for me, and maybe for you too, but that's probably a sign that we are reading it correctly. The Bible should make imperfect people uncomfortable. Amen? And where it does we are supposed to let it challenge and correct us.

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On the other hand, some of you aren't from that kind of culture and so don't have the same hang ups we do. We look to you to lead us in this area. Can I have an amen from someone who isn't built of plywood? Remember Watoto? That's what I'm talking about.

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Now the response of the people to Ezra and Nehemiah wasn't perfect right away; they needed to be encouraged. Look at verse 9.

[Read Nehemiah 8:9-12]

While the Bible convicts us and shows us where we fall short, there is a theme that runs deeply through both the Old and the New Testaments that calls us to celebrate the grace that we are saved more than remorse over the sin that causes us to fall short.

Now there is a place for sorrow over sin and even somber reflection about the severity of following God's will. I think of Jesus in the garden sweating blood and praying "Not My will but Yours be done."⁷ He wasn't happy in that moment. But this somberness is held in tension by God most often calling His people to feast and celebrate rather than fast and mourn.

Did you know that every year seven major feasts were commanded in the Old Testament, each of them lasting multiple days,⁸ and only one day of fasting.⁹ So when we understand the words of the Law the result is celebration not mourning, and this joy should lead to a full body, mind and spirit response – we shouldn't just think about joy, we should eat and drink to it! Friends, understanding grace leads to abundant living!

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So how do we grow in this? And I'm not talking about working up emotionalism, I'm talking about how do we increase our understanding about the word of God, and our responsibility to bless His name such that it inspires a gut level response of joy that bubbles out physically in our bodies?

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There are three prescriptive things that we see here in Nehemiah.

⁶ Romans 12:1-2

⁷ Luke 22:42-44

⁸ <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Introduction/introduction.html>

⁹ Jeremiah 36:6

First, Nehemiah, or Ezra rather, teaches us who God is. So in verse 6 we read that Ezra praised the LORD, the great God – he told the people about who God is. And we get this throughout the Bible. It is a book that tells us it matters what we think about God.

So often what ends up happening when we think of God is that we imagine Him a certain way. So I've come across people – and probably you have too – who used to believe in God, but then when they experienced something terrible they stopped believing.

So they say: “How could a God of love allow millions of people to die in natural disasters, or be killed by genocides?” Or probably more personally “If God is a God of love how come He let my mom die?” But when people say things like this they reveal that actually the God they were worshipping before was not the God of the Bible, but rather a God of their own imagination. And then usually their rejection of God is a rejection of the God they had created in their own imagination.

And this is clear because the Bible holds together God's love and our experience of pain. So Romans says:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. (Romans 8:28-37)

So the Bible assures us that God is love, but at the same time it says this doesn't mean He keeps bad things from happening to us. Rather, His love shines through the trouble and hardships we experience and brings us to the ultimate good He wants for us – being conformed to His likeness. That's what God wants for us because that is what is best for us.

Or the matter of sexual orientation is huge in our culture today, and people say “A God of love wouldn't tell me to be different than I am, He would accept me gay or straight.” Therefore I reject God. But the mistake here is that God does accept us gay or straight, but He is never content to leave us where He finds us.

So He pours out His salvation on us no matter what kinds of sin we struggle with, but then He calls all of us to put to death our sin, and pursue holiness.

So in John 8 we get the woman caught in adultery. It's one of my favorite stories because Jesus accepts her and loves her and rescues her from those who want her dead. And then He leaves her with both the words:

“neither do I condemn you... (and) Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:11)

So it is a mistake to reject or embrace God based on ideas about Him that aren't in Scripture. But it is when we understand who God is that our response to Him becomes one of joy that bubbles out of us soul, mind and body.

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As an aside "The Holy Wild" that we are going through in our Care Groups is about who God is – it's about God's attributes. And it's written to inspire this kind of joy-filled response in us. So look for that as you read, and allow your heart to well up with praise. And don't keep what you learn in it in your head, let it affect your body.

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The second prescriptive thing Nehemiah, and really the whole Bible, gives us is a correct view of ourselves. And this is why after the people understood what the Law said their first response was to grieve. They recognized that they were caught. And they felt convicted. And this is what the Bible does to us.

Now the human default is to think of themselves in one of two ways. Most of us think we are pretty awesome, and some of us think we are terrible and never do anything right. And the Bible corrects both these perspectives. So if you are depressed, first the Bible agrees with your assessment of yourself – you aren't that great – but then God says your identity isn't tied to your inabilities, it's tied to who He has made you to be – you are a child of God. He seeks then to left you out of depression. But most of us think we are pretty awesome. I'll use myself as an example.

So I'm not perfect, but I'm better than most. I don't do drugs or smoke. I don't get angry when I drive. I'm not violent towards my wife. I love my kids. I'm pretty disciplined with doing things that God wants His followers to do. I've set up accountability so that I stay away from sins like pornography. I'm a pretty good guy.

And this is the way most of us think about ourselves. But when we read the Bible – like actually read what it says – we run into a problem because through it God says "Dan, you aren't that good. You've set the standard of "good" up as being better than the guy down the street, but he's not the standard, I'm the standard. And next to My glory you fall short. God doesn't grade on a curve. There is no one righteous." We are all broken sinners in need of a Saviour.

So Nehemiah and the Bible show us who God is, and then show us who we are in contrast. And third, God's word shows us why we must understand these first two perspectives correctly. And what we see is that God wants our joy primarily not our guilt or sorrow.

So verse 12 tells us that after the people understood who God was and who they were, the priests challenged them not to get stuck on grief, but to celebrate in light of God's salvation. And when they got this they started to party.

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Here is something that is incredibly important for us to get our minds around; the commands of God are never about oppressing people. A lot of people think the Bible is

a big list of do's and don'ts and God is sitting up in heaven getting a kick out of making us miserable. But that isn't what the Bible tells us God is like at all.

Rather throughout the Word we get the message that if we live our lives God's way we will find true life and joy. Jesus says:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

So if your life is marked by less than life to the full; if you have misery or stress or over busyness or un-fulfillment or guilt that's evidence that you aren't doing life God's way.

What God wants for you is human flourishing. Now not life with an absence of difficulty, but joy in the face of adversity. He wants celebration and prosperity and vitality. God says when you live My way you will have life to the full. So do you want that?

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A few months back we went through a series called "Life in the Kingdom." And in this series we saw over and over again that what God wants for us is to get the treasure.

Jesus said there was a man who found treasure in a field, and when he realized and understood what it was he was ecstatic, and in his joy he went and sold all he had and bought the field.¹⁰ He bought the field to get the treasure! And this is what God wants for each of us. He wants us to be people who get His treasure – He wants us to be people who get Him – because He knows this is what is best for us.

So brothers and sisters, I'm not sure where God finds you today through the words of Nehemiah. But allow them to speak. Don't let the offense of conviction harden your heart, rather allow it to expose the areas where you are living with less than abundant joy and let it show you who God is and who you are and what God wants for you. See the treasure, get it, then stop weeping about your brokenness and start celebrating God's salvation.

¹⁰ Matthew 13:44-46