

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-18

Title: “Life Together – in the Word”

INTRODUCTION

We’re spending these weeks talking about our life together as the people of God. What powerful things happen when we’re together!

Open your Bibles to Nehemiah 8. We’ve taken a break from our series in First Peter to spend in an Old Testament passage learning about our “Life Together.” As I read Nehemiah 8-10 it struck me that our church is engaged in the same thing that was happening for the Jews here in Nehemiah’s day. They had returned to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon and their city and the temple were in need of restoration. So under Nehemiah’s leadership they began to rebuild. And we are on a similar journey as a church, striving to make our campus a tool for future generations to use for ministry. Tonight our Master Plan Team will bring an exciting recommendation to our church about a revised Master Plan. We encourage you to be here at 6pm to share in this important evening.

By the way, speaking of our campus, I’m pleased to announce that we now received over \$450,000 in the special offering to purchase the Texaco property. You’ll recall that is the purchase price. We will still need another \$100,000 or so to complete the clean up of the property.

Israel’s leaders knew that it would take more than just restored walls and buildings for the people of God to fulfill His purposes for their lives. Spiritual rebuilding would have to happen as well. So they set a part a time when the people could come together to worship the Lord God. And Nehemiah 8-10 describes this magnificent gathering of the people of God, and all that God did among them.

We saw last week how their life together included worship of Almighty God. And today we’ll see how their life together is affected by the Word of God.

Let’s stand as we read Nehemiah 8:1,3,5,7-8.

Now from Nehemiah 8, let’s see what happens when the Word of God shapes our life together as the people of God.

1. THE WORD OF GOD IS CONSUMED (8:1-6).

So the people gathered together, like we do on the Lord’s Day. We know that this happens in the seventh month, which is the beginning of the Jewish year. And we know from reading the Law of Moses that this gathering coincided with the celebration of the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement.

The people call for Ezra, the main spiritual leader of the Jews at that time, to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, by which the Lord had spoken to His people. So Ezra and other leaders are up on this special platform and Ezra opened the book, the Word of the Lord. And v.5 says that when he

did, the people spontaneously stood to their feet. And for the next hours (maybe as many as six hours) the people stood and listened as the Word of God was read.

Nehemiah 8:3 (NIV) - 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.

Literally “the ears of the people were toward...” the Book of the Law. They stood and listened because they knew they were hearing from God.

Note: Every time you open your Bible to read and study you are having an encounter with God.

What’s happening here is that they are consuming the Word of God. And that is essential for the people of God. We consume the Word in our own private devotional and study time. We read it, memorize it, meditate on it, study it and share it with others.

Jesus said told His disciples:

John 8:31 (NASB95) – “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine;

But the Word plays a big part of our life together. The church in the book of Acts understood this. When they gathered...

Acts 2:42 (NIV) – They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The “apostles’ teaching” is the essence of what we have in our New Testament. Our New Testament is the apostolic witness that is passed to us from the apostles of Jesus to the churches in NT times and conveyed to us today in the Scriptures.

Paul admonished his friend Timothy:

1 Timothy 4:13 – “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”

Why? First, because not everyone had a copy of the Scriptures. Today most of us have several Bibles around the house. In those days that wasn’t the case. If they were to consume the Word of God they needed it read publicly. But also, there’s power in the Word of God. It is sharper than a double-edged sword. God uses it to cut through all the clutter in our lives and get to what He is wanting to do in our lives.

So we see the people of God all together attentively listening to one man read from the Word of God. The Word of God is being consumed.

2. THE WORD OF GOD IS EXPLAINED (8:7-8).

Ezra had at his side some other spiritual leaders, priests also known as Levites. Notice what happens.

Nehemiah 8:7 (NIV) - The Levites ... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

Now something happens here that is very important and we shouldn't miss it. The people had gathered in the square "as one man." They were all together hearing the same thing together. But then they were broken up into smaller groups. It seems that the Levites then gathered with the people where the Scriptures that had been read were explained.

To put it in terms that we might be able to relate to, they had public worship, then they had Sunday School. There was a time and a place and a purpose for the people to break up into smaller groups for the purpose of being instructed more carefully in the Scriptures.

And we understand this as a church, and that's why we do something called Sunday School.

Through Sunday School the entire church engages in a systematic program of Bible study designed to give believers the essential and increasing knowledge of Scriptural truth leading to life transformation. It is also through the Sunday School that the church is organized to stay vitally connected with every church member and prospective church member for the purpose of ministry and encouragement.

So Ezra had read the Scripture, but it needed to be explained more thoroughly, so the Levites then gathered the people into smaller groups to instruct the people.

Nehemiah 8:7 (NIV) - The Levites ... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

Now just take note of that word "instructed." It is a rich word and I'll explain it as we get to the next verse.

Nehemiah 8:8 (NIV) - They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

So these "Sunday School teachers" did three things:

- **They read the Scriptures clearly.**

Nehemiah 8:8 (NIV) - "They read from the Book of the Law, making it clear"

They read and made it clear. Maybe there were some words that were read that the people didn't understand. The teachers clarified things for them.

- **They explained the Scriptures thoroughly.**

Nehemiah 8:8 (NIV) – “And giving the meaning ...

“giving the meaning” = They went down another level to explain the meaning of various truths and principles found in the Word of God.

- **They applied the Scripture practically.**

Nehemiah 8:8 (NIV) – “So that the people could understand what was being read.”

Remember I asked you to take note of that word in v.7 ... “instructed.” It comes from the same word “understand.” It means to take knowledge of something and skillfully put it to use. It means to comprehend something so completely that you are able to make proper decisions based upon that comprehension.

ILLUSTRATION – When a person goes to medical school, what are they learning? How many bones are found in the human hand? Yes. What causes a particular disease? Yes. But there’s so much more. They’re learning how to take that knowledge and put it to use in saving lives and healing sick people.

So if you are a Sunday School teacher or a teacher in some other way in the life of the church you have a big responsibility. The idea is not just to impart information ... it is to effect spiritual transformation. Don’t you dare go in and just read the lesson book. Serve up a feast of God’s Word. It is to give people skill in living the truth out in their everyday lives.

So these Levite teachers did three things:

- Read clearly (“read...clear”)
- Explained thoroughly (“meaning”)
- Applied practically (“understand”)

So the Word is consumed. The Word is explained. And then...

3. THE WORD OF GOD BRINGS CONVICTION (8:9).

Now something happens as the Word of God is consumed by the people and explained to the people. They came under great conviction ... so much so that they were weeping.

Nehemiah 8:9 (NIV) - 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.

Now the word of God brings conviction to the people. Remember this was the equivalent of the Jewish New Years celebration. It was supposed to be a time of rejoicing and merriment, but when the Spirit of God has taken the Word of God and applied it to your heart, it brings conviction. There can be no celebration until we deal with the conviction that God has put in our hearts.

Now why was there this incredible grief? They knew they were guilty. They were thinking about all the years that had been wasted because of their disobedience to God. In the reading of Scripture they came face to face with the Holy God, and they were devastated.

So the Word of God brings conviction, but then...

4. THE WORD OF GOD BRINGS JOY AND COMFORT (8:10-12).

The Book of the Law of Moses that had been read and explained taught that when we sin, there was a way for forgiveness to be secured. There were offerings and sacrifices that God commanded; and through these atoning sacrifices, forgiveness was given. And the people needed to be reminded of this. This was the meaning of the festival that was taking place ... to celebrate the grace of God.

So ...

Nehemiah 8:10 (NIV) - 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.”

Just look at that last, wonderful sentence:

“do not grieve” = Nehemiah said, “I know that the conviction you feel in your heart has brought you grief, sorrow and distress. But God’s forgiveness is great. God has redeemed us.

“for joy of the Lord is your strength” = The joy of the Lord will make you strong.

Do you need to hear that today? Do not grieve. The joy of the Lord will make you strong. Turn your eyes upon the Lord and His Word. Worship Him. Rest in Him.

Nehemiah 8:11 (NIV) - The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.”

So the people were able to be comforted and to go away and rejoice...

Nehemiah 8:12b (NIV) - Because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

“the people...understood” – that’s the same rich word as is found in vv.7-9. The clear reading, the thorough explanation and the practical application caused the people to “now understand the words that had been made know to them.” They got it! And it produced joy in their hearts.

Now the next thing we see is ...

5. THE WORD OF GOD IS OBEYED (8:13-18).

Now on the next day the leaders of families and the Israelites came together to get into the Word again. They have a special Bible study. So you have a group of them gathering again ... more life together.

Nehemiah 8:13 (NIV) - 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.

“give attention” = They needed to know from God’s Word how to live and how to lead.

Note: Spiritual leaders need to be people of the Book. Whether you’re the spiritual leader in your home or in your church, the Word of God is so important.

Nehemiah 8:14 (NIV) - 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

They discovered something they had overlooked before. There was one particular way in which the people had not been fully obedient to the Lord. As part of the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement, they were also to observe something called the Feast of Booths or Tents. This was prescribed by the Lord when He gave the Law to Moses.

Nehemiah 8:16 (NIV) - 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.

They were to make these temporary shelters and stay in them for a short period time (camp out???) to remember that the people of God had lived in tents during their journeys, indicating that God had provided for them even though they were travelling to the Promised Land.

Nehemiah 8:17b (NIV) - 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.

Joy comes when we’ve been obedient to the Lord ... when we have fully obeyed the Lord.

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – A couple of years ago Nan gave me a really nice coffee maker for Christmas. I loved it. It was just perfect for my coffee drinking habit (addiction). Well one day it just quit working. I’d fill it up with water and put in the ground coffee, but it wouldn’t brew the coffee. I called the manufacturer and they sent me another one. I opened the box, and thought, “Perhaps I should read the instructions this time.” I did, and discovered that I had missed an important instruction. That from time to time I needed to run some vinegar through the coffee maker to clean out the minerals that had built up. That was my problem.

Maybe as you read the instruction book for life (the Bible) you will discover some things that *you haven't done that you need to start doing*. As a follower of Jesus you're supposed to share your faith with others. You're supposed to give sacrificially and generously of your income. You're supposed to be served.

Or you'll discover some things that *you have been doing that you shouldn't do*. There are sins that the Spirit of God shines a light on that you must forsake.

And when you and I adjust our lives we will come to the same place as the people of God through ages have come ... "And there was very great joy!"