

Text: Nehemiah 8-10

Title: “Life Together ... As Families”

INTRODUCTION

You know, technology is amazing. I’m sure you’re familiar with the satellite mapping that is available to us. You can see the big picture, and you can zoom in to amazing detail in the satellite imagery.

ILLUSTRATION – For example (SATELLITE PHOTO OF TEXAS) there is the state of Texas. And the state is made up of counties and cities, (SATELLITE PHOTO OF TARRANT COUNTY) and there’s our own Tarrant County and Fort Worth. But you zoom in more and you can see that our city is made up of many neighborhoods. (SATELLITE PHOTO OF SUMMER CREEK) I’ve just picked our neighborhood. And each neighborhood is made of many homes, (SATELLIT PHOTO OF HOUSE ON MISTY TRAIL) and if you zoom in you can see our home. This satellite image was taken during December because I can see my Christmas inflatables in the yard.

Well, if you could look at a spiritual satellite view of the Jews in Nehemiah 8-10 you would see something similar. Open your Bibles once again to Nehemiah 8. We’ve spent the last few weeks looking at this historic gathering of the people of God recorded here in this portion of God’s Word. And we’re talking about our life together.

With our “spiritual satellite technology” we’ve been able to see the people of God gathered (thousands of them) in the large gathering of all the people for worship around the Word of God and prayer. Then we zoomed in a bit and saw that they also met in smaller groups around the Levites who instructed the people more carefully in the Scriptures that had been read. Then we zoomed in a bit more and saw how they made themselves accountable to one another as the people of God to obey the commands of the Lord. Well today I want us to zoom in a little more where we see the actual families come into sharper focus.

This is also true in our church. We’re looking at our life together as the people of God. We’ve looked at our life together in the largest gathering ... worship services. But we know that there are some things we can’t accomplish simply attending a worship service. So the next venue for spiritual formation in our life together is Sunday School ... smaller groups where we are able to break our congregation down into manageable units (departments and classes) so we can stay connected with each other and to study God’s Word together in a systematic way. But there are some things we can’t accomplish in worship services and Sunday School on Sunday morning, so we have the next venue for spiritual formation is the A2C groups. These groups are forming now and will begin meeting this evening.

But this morning I want us to think about the most basic unit of spiritual formation in our life together as the people of God ... our families.

ILLUSTRATION – I was listening to the post-game interviews after the Cowboys game last Sunday night. They were talking with Redskins quarterback Donovan McNabb. He talked about how intensely the Redskins team prepared for the game. Then he said this: “The game is played

during the week. It's not just on Sunday." I thought about how true that is in the Christian life. What happens here on Sunday's when the whole church is gathered depends primarily on what happens during the week where we live out our life in Christ at home, at work, at school, and wherever God may place us.

As we look at this momentous month in the life of the people of God we see that families are very much in the picture.

1. BIBLICAL INSTRUCTION

Nehemiah 8:2 (NIV) - So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

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.

So there were men and women, husbands and wives and children (described as "those who were able to understand"). And they received instruction in the Law of the Lord as families.

The Word of God needs to be at the center of our family life. Why? Well for one thing, it lays the foundation for our salvation.

EXAMPLE: Remember what we learn about a guy by the name of Timothy in the NT. He was a pastor of a church when Paul wrote to him about the importance of holding on to the truths of Scripture:

2 Timothy 3:14 (NIV) - But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,

2 Timothy 3:15 (NIV) - and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Now how did Timothy begin knowing the holy Scriptures from infancy? Did his mother and grandmother (who we know were godly women) take him to Sunday School? No, he learned it from his family.

That's not to say that children's Sunday School and other studies are not important. But rather those ministries are to support what children should already be getting at home.

So biblical instruction helps lay the foundation for a child or an adult to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Also, biblical instruction is important because it lays the foundation for faithfulness to God.

EXAMPLE: When God gave the Law to the Israelites in the wilderness He wanted those truths to be communicated to the children.

SUMMARIZE - Deuteronomy 6:6-9 (NIV) - These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

There are many ways to accomplish this: reading and talking about Scripture at bedtime, or in a time set aside for family devotion. On the way home from church you can talk about what you learned from God's Word that day. When you are making decisions as a family, you can spend time searching the Scriptures for wisdom about that decision. Parents you should use it in the moral training of your children. You can something like, "The reason that we don't use filthy language is that God's Word says we are to let no unwholesome word come out of our mouths."

So with biblical instruction we are laying a solid foundation in our families for faithfulness to God. But there's something else we see here about these families of faith.

2. SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

There were spiritual leaders in the families. We know this by reading...

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...

So there was this big meeting of the leaders of the people of God. Notice who was present: "the heads of the families." And what were these leaders doing?

"(They) gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law."

And the heads of the families were men who sought after God in His Word. And that is so important today.

Now ideally, this should be the husband and the father. Men, God has called us to give spiritual leadership to our families. And we can't lead them where we going ourselves.

I know that we have many single parent families in our church. And there may some moms who have to shoulder this responsibility. In that case, moms, you have to take seriously your responsibility to lead your home to be faithful to Christ.

And the next thing we see about these families is what I will call...

3. HOUSEHOLD DEVOTION

They took their faith home with them.

Now remember that in this sacred month in the Jewish calendar there were some very important festivals that were commanded for the people of God. There was the Feast of Trumpets and the Feast of Booths. Both of those were religious celebrations that reminded the Jews of God's faithfulness to His people through the years. Notice that when it came time to celebrate, they were told to go home and celebrate.

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."

Nehemiah 8:12 (NIV) - Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Nehemiah 8:16 (NIV) - So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, (THEIR HOMES) in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim.

We can learn a lot from the Jewish families. They had family observances in their homes on the Sabbath each week that reminded them that they were to people of God. The most important Jewish celebration of the year was the celebration of Passover. There were some really special things that they did in their homes with their families at Passover.

They took their faith home with them. And we should do the same.

ILLUSTRATION – I was introduced to this when I married Nan and began to be part of her family's Christmas celebrations. They did something that I had never seen done before. When I was growing up, on Christmas morning, we got up really early and raced in to the family room to see what Santa had brought us. Then we'd start ripping into the presents to see what else we might have gotten. Well in Nan's family, before they opened any gifts on Christmas morning her dad would read the Christmas story from the Scriptures. He would remind the family of the real meaning of Christmas.

But it goes even deeper. There was...

4. RADICAL COMMITMENT

Now remember that at the climax of this momentous celebration for the people of God ... after they had worshipped, and read the Scriptures, and celebrated the feasts, and prayed a most fervent prayer, then they made deep, radical commitments to God. The people made a binding agreement with one another that they would obey the Law of the Lord. The leaders all affixed their seals to it. Notice how the rest of the people respond:

Nehemiah 10:28 (NIV) - "The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the

Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—

Nehemiah 10:29 (NIV) - all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.

So these commitments that we make to the Lord we should make, not just as individuals, but as families. It's Joshua saying, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

And the next thing shows us what this radical commitment looked like:

5. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS

Now the commitments they made were very specific. And the very first one they make is found in...

Nehemiah 10:30 (NIV) - "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.

Now what does this mean? It meant that they didn't want their children marrying outside the faith. They would say to their children, "We are the covenant people of God. God has called us to be different. God is unique, and we are to be unique. There are some things that we do as the people of God that others don't do. And there are some things that other people do that we don't do."

This matter of marriage was important. When Israel returned to the Palestine after their exile in Babylon/Persia they were returning to a land that was populated by pagan people ... people who did not know the Lord God. They practiced despicable things. Immorality was rampant. For Jewish sons and daughters to marry spouses like that would compromise their commitment to the Lord God.

And this is true for us as the New Testament people of God ... the Church.

2 Corinthians 6:14 (NIV) - Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

But this cultural uniqueness extended to how they used their time.

Nehemiah 10:31 (NIV) - "When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.

Now the Sabbath observance was a very important part of the Law of the Lord. The Sabbath was a sign to the Israelites that they were to trust God to provide by keeping the Sabbath holy and not working on that day. And the Sabbath was also a witness to their pagan neighbors, that the Jews were different and unique.

So in these ways the Jews went against the current of the culture that was all around them. And as Christian families today we must not be afraid to stand up and say, “We’re just not going to go along with the crowd. We have made a radical commitment to follow Christ.”

Now the commitment of these families of faith goes even deeper to include...

6. MATERIAL STEWARDSHIP

Nehemiah 10:34 (NIV) - “We—the priests, the Levites and the people—have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.

Now the corporate life of the people of God revolved around the sacrifices that took place at the temple. Here the sins of the people were atoned for through the sacrifice of burnt offerings. Now there wasn’t a gas burner inside that altar that the priest just went over and turned on. The offerings were burned by a wood fire. Where did the wood come from? The people ... families ... brought it as offerings.

Nehemiah 10:35 (NIV) - “We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree.

Now the Jews were primarily agricultural people. When did they get paid? They got paid at harvest time, whenever their crops were harvested. And when they got that “paycheck,” they gave the firstfruits to the Lord as a tithe. They brought it to the house of God to be used in the work of God. This is called “store house giving.”

Here again is an important principle for us as the New Testament people of God. The New Testament teaches storehouse giving just like the Old Testament does. And this should be a family commitment. Children learn stewardship in this way as they watch their family make decisions about how they will spend their money, and give to the work of the Lord. We decide together as families, “We’re going to live on a little less so we can be generous to the work of the Lord in our church and around the world.”

CONCLUSION

Would you agree with me that our nation needs to change? Sure it does. God wants to change the United States, but for that to happen, states like Texas will need to change. Texas can’t change if Tarrant County and Fort Worth doesn’t change. And our city can’t change if our church isn’t changed. And our church won’t change if our families don’t change. And our families can’t change if you and I don’t change.

So it starts with, “God make me a new person.” And that will change my family. And families will change churches, and churches will change cities and cities will change states and states will change a nation. That’s how important this is.