

Nehemiah 8:10

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[0 : 00] Return with me this evening to the first chapter that we read together, Nehemiah chapter 8. And we might take as the focus of our attention this evening the words that you'll find in verse 10.

Nehemiah chapter 8 and verse 10. And perhaps in the middle of verse 10, reading from the middle, This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Now if the books of the Old Testament were placed in the order in which they were written, Ezra and Nehemiah would come at the very end next to Malachi. In fact, Malachi was the prophet at the time of Nehemiah.

If I can again go into some of the history behind the chapter that we are considering this evening. It's 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah.

[1 : 22] And this should all come back to you now because we've said all this before. In 597 he returned a second time to destroy the city of Jerusalem and pull it down to the ground.

To take everyone captive except the very poorest to Babylon. This was no accident. Anyone who knows the Old Testament will know that God had warned his people, Israel, time and time again through the prophets, that if they continued in their idolatry, then God would send them, God would allow them to be taken into captivity.

He would take them from his presence and from their land. And this is exactly, as you know, what happened. They were taken by Nebuchadnezzar, as we've been reading in Daniel, to Babylon. And there they remained until for 70 years. The exact time, the exact period of time that God had foretold through his prophets. He had warned that they would be taken into captivity, but it would be a captivity that lasted 70 years exactly.

And as sure as his word was said, Cyrus, King Cyrus, who we've read about again in Daniel, in 536 BC, he issued a statement allowing all the Jews to return to the homeland free, to live as they wanted and to worship as they wanted.

[2 : 49] 70 years had passed. The Jews were now allowed home to their own land. Immediately, 50,000 Jewish people returned and set about rebuilding the temple.

But that wasn't as easy as it might sound. They became discouraged very quickly by opposition from the people who had settled, meantime, in that particular country during the captivity.

And they became discouraged because of the sheer enormity of the task of building the temple.

And soon, they abandoned the work. Only the foundation was laid.

16 years later, when all the people had settled down in their homes, God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. And the whole point of them was to challenge the people.

To challenge the people about their way of life. And they showed them how much they were neglecting the very things that lay at the center of their existence as God's people. The things of God.

[3 : 54] They were neglecting the things of God. So again, the work on the temple was started. And this time, it was completed. About 20 years after the initial return to Jerusalem.

60 more years passed. And then Ezra, a priest, he led another section of Jewish people back to Jerusalem. Ezra's task was to reestablish the spiritual and moral life of the people who had returned, which was in rather a deplorable state.

14 years after Ezra came to Jerusalem, God raised up another man, Nehemiah. And his task was to build not the temple, but the walls of Jerusalem.

And the book of Nehemiah describes the challenge that lay in front of Nehemiah and how he encouraged the people. And he led them in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

He was also the governor of Jerusalem as he led God's people, restoring as he restored the people to himself and his word. Now, you'll notice that if you are familiar with the book of Nehemiah, the prophet, or rather the governor, I should say, it is in two parts.

[5 : 11] The first six chapters concern the building of the walls themselves. Tremendous achievement, taking only 52 days against intense and continual opposition to the work.

But there was no room for complacency even after the walls were built. How now were they going to live as the people of God in a renewed, albeit in a renewed, state of mind and heart?

There was much to be done with these people. And the last seven chapters, the second section of the book of Nehemiah, describes how Nehemiah set about encouraging and teaching and warning and nourishing the people in their life as the people of God.

What this chapter describes for us is the first of a great assembly that took place when all the people gathered together after the wall was rebuilt.

And the purpose of this assembly was to reestablish the seventh month and to solemnize the seventh month as the month of festivals.

[6 : 22] Now, no festivals, no feasts had been celebrated during the whole captivity. In fact, for hundreds of years, people had neglected the feasts that God had established through Moses way back in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers.

And this was a time when the people, the people who had returned from captivity in Babylon, they began to reestablish the feasts. That's what we read at the very beginning.

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the water gate. And they called upon Ezra, the scribe, to speak to them and to bring out the words of the book of the law of Moses, their Old Testament. In other words, their Bible, if you like. And his task was to stand on a platform and it was to read in front of everyone the book of the law. This was the first worship service, if you like, that had taken place for over a hundred years.

And this was a remarkable occasion when the whole assembly of Israel had gathered together to rededicate themselves publicly to God. And I want you to notice how this worship service took place.

[7 : 34] And I want you to notice some five features of this worship service. Because this service can be looked upon as an illustration or a type or a model of every true worship service.

And I want to suggest to you that this is what constitutes real worship as the people of God gather together to listen and to sing praise and to praise Him at this very particular time.

Five things then. Number one is this. I want you to notice how they listened to the words of the law. I secondly want you to notice how they worshipped.

Thirdly, how the law was read. Fourthly, how it spoke to them. And then fifthly, how they went away. These five things then I want to bring to your attention very, very briefly. First of all, how they listened. Special mention, if you look at verse 3, special mention is made of how the people listened.

[8 : 37] So on the first day, verse 3, he read, Ezra read the law aloud from daybreak until noon as he faced the square before the water gate.

And all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Now I want you to notice the whole structure and process of this service. This is real worship.

This is worship from the heart. And it begins with taking the word of God, the law of God, and it begins by hearing the word of God. And that is how to listen.

They listened attentively to the law of God. Now this again has to be seen in contrast, against the background, between, in contrast, to the way in which they listened to God's law before the captivity.

Prophet after prophet stood before the people out in the streets and wherever they could, wherever they found people, and they would declare to them what God's mind was.

[9 : 41] They would warn them. They would try and strive with them. They would plead with them to think again and to stop worshipping other gods. To get them to return to the true, the living and true God.

And they would walk past them. The people walked past the prophet. Why? Because they had, over the centuries, become so accustomed to God's word being read to them.

And they had so become so accustomed to the God of Israel, they became complacent. They assumed that, come what may, they were indestructible. That no foe, no enemy whatsoever could possibly break down the holy city of Jerusalem.

Because they thought that God had pledged himself to them and nothing could destroy them, come what may. So it didn't seem to matter to them what the prophets said, how much they warned them and how much they pleaded with them.

They simply walked past them and ignored and threw away God's word. But not so now. Because now, two generations later, they are now returning after the captivity as a consequence, as a fulfillment of the promise of God.

[10:47] They are now rededicating themselves in humility and in fear and in worship to the God of Israel. Thankful that he has kept his word and brought them back to their own country.

And now, they are going to listen to his word. And there's a freshness with which that word is received. And there's a great lesson for us this evening.

especially for those of you and for those of us who have been brought up to listen and to respect God's word. Could it be that over the process of years that we have become so accustomed to the Bible, that we have become so used to listening to it, so used to the stories that we read and that we have read from the time we were knee high, from the time we learned how to speak and understand.

Could it be that we have become so accustomed to it that it's lost its sheer power in our lives and we have simply neglected it altogether? Well, I hope that if there's any danger of that having crept into our hearts this evening, I hope that we will make a determined and conscious effort every time God's word is read and is preached, every time that we take it and read it and look at it, that we will listen attentively, that we will speak to ourselves and say, I am going to attentively listen to when God, because this is the very words of God itself.

Now, there's something particular, have you ever noticed how difficult it is to listen to God's word? Have you ever noticed on a practical level, as soon as you begin to take up your Bible, as soon as you begin to sit and listen in church to when the Bible is preached, it's incredible, isn't it?

[12:35] It's one of the most difficult tasks that you can undertake. You sit and you listen, all of a sudden, all these thoughts start coming into your mind. Have you ever noticed that? You say, you walk in the door and you say, I'm going to worship today, I'm going to give myself to this service.

I'm going to really listen to what is said, I'm going to learn something from this service. Well, that's all very good, but it's not so easy, is it? You listen and all of a sudden, the things we've been involved in during the week, the new car that we've just bought, the tasks, the projects that we're going to be involved in next week, something about the house, something about the family, something about the meal that we've left cooking on a Sunday morning.

It doesn't matter what it is. It's the most difficult task in all the world to listen to God's Word. And you know why? Because whenever you do that, there's a spiritual warfare going on.

Because there is an influence being brought to bear upon your life and your mind to keep you, to hinder you, and to prevent you from listening to God's Word. Because remember that this is the living Word of God that is able to change your whole life.

So any time that we begin to listen to it, always remember that we're involved in a warfare. A warfare. We'll say a wee bit more about that, a little bit more about that when we come to look at it later on in the fellowship.

[13:57] These people listened attentively to the Word of God. And I want to remind you every time you listen to the Word of God, it requires a determined effort.

It requires hard work to listen to the Word of God. I want you to notice secondly how they worshipped. In verse 6 we read the following.

Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifting their hands, lifted their hands and responded, Amen! Amen! And then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

The first point I want you to notice here is that Ezra was not the only person that was involved in this service. I want you to notice that everyone was involved in the service.

And I want to remind you of that because any time we come to worship God, you are not worshipping as spectators. you are worshipping as the worshipping people of God who have come to respond to the Word of God.

[15 : 06] Indeed, it's true to say that if there is no response to the hearing of God's precious Word, then there is no worship. That's what worship is all about. It's not simply coming and being a spectator, watching what's going on with a keen interest, watching how eloquent the minister or the preacher is and listening to what's going on coming to meet other people, all of these things.

When we really begin to worship, we respond to the voice of God. Look at how they responded. They responded by Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted up their hands and they responded, Amen, Amen.

And they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. First of all, what that shows us is that these people were conscious that God was in their midst. He was present with them.

He wasn't a God who was afar away. And so real was He. So real was His personal, powerful presence that they felt compelled to respond to His Word.

They felt compelled to bow down and to worship, to lift up their hands and to say with one accord, Amen. We love to hear this Word. We love to hear the voice of God because we know that He's with us.

[16 : 25] We can see it in our past. We can see how He's fulfilled His Word and bringing us back from Babylon back home just as He said He would. He's gathered us here. He's given us success in rebuilding the temple and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

We love this God and we want to express that love. We know that He's here. We know He's present with us. Do you remember that every time you come into the house of God? Do you remember you're not worshipping a God who is far away, a God who is simply a notion, but a personal living God who loves to delight, who delights to live and to dwell and to hear and to be involved in the worship?

Do you remember that this evening, that God is here in this building, here, searching our hearts, driving His Word home to us, making it clear and plain to us?

What's your response to that? Is it the same as those people? Amen, Lord. So let it be. Amen. I want you to notice in the third place that their form, not only were they conscious of the presence, the near presence of God, but I want you to notice that their form of worship reflected what was deep down in their hearts.

They lifted up their hands, physically lifted up their hands, not because the action of lifting up their hands would gain them more favour with God, nor was it because their uttering of the word Amen, Amen would gain their favour with God, but that's what they really wanted to do, because it expressed what was deep down in their hearts.

[18 : 12] And I feel at the risk of perhaps being controversial, but let's be controversial. Perhaps there are two extremes, and God forbid that we should ever in our worship go to either of these two extremes, where our form of worship becomes all action, and where it becomes all spontaneity, but God forbid also that we should go to the other extreme, where our form of worship means nothing.

It's just an empty form, and we don't even know why we do what we do. And may God grant that our form, whatever that is, will truly reflect a deep down longing in our hearts for a personal, loving God.

that's what they did. They raised their hands because they wanted to, because it reflected what was in their hearts. They shouted, Amen, Amen, and then they bowed with their faces to the ground.

That is worship, because it comes from the heart. And then thirdly, I want you to notice how the law was read. Verse 7 and 8, the Levites, now I'm not going to list this horrendous list of names here, which is very difficult to pronounce, but the Levites instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there.

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 said. In other words, there was a responsibility not placed simply on the people gathered, but those who were leading.

[20 : 01] There was a particular responsibility placed on Ezra and the Levites, those who were leading. Now, I want you to notice, first of all, that they did not make it simple.

They didn't water it down in any way. There was no change to the law whatsoever. But what they did do was they made it clear. They made sure that as far as lay within them, as far as possible, the words of God would be understandable or intelligible to the people as they listened.

Now, there must have been a language problem because these people were second generation Jews. They had lived, they had been born, all of them had been born in Babylon. They would have been raised, as we've seen in the book of Daniel, they would have been raised with Babylonian culture.

They would have been encouraged by the Babylonians at the time to learn the language and the culture. So they were. We don't know how much Hebrew they actually knew. Perhaps some of them didn't know any Hebrew, so there was a translation problem with them.

So perhaps all the time that the law was being read, some of the Levites were having to go around translating. We don't know. But it means more than that, I would suggest to you.

[21 : 17] It means what we would term as one of the greatest tasks of the church. And that is to teach the word of God and to spread the word of God in such a way as to make it clear whatever the generation, whatever the culture, whatever the country, whatever the background, the task of the church is to take the word of God without changing it.

Without changing it. And to make it clear to whoever we are taking it to. And that is no easy task. Any of you who have been involved in explaining the Bible to anyone, whether it's children, whether it's a Bible class, or whether it's teaching in any way whatsoever, an RE teacher or whatever, you will know how difficult it is to explain God's word.

And I want you again to remind yourselves of the importance of this task as you pray for the work of the church. Whether it's missionary work, whether it's me as a minister, or whether it's your own minister wherever you come from, or whether it's Sunday school teachers, or parents, or Bible class teachers, or RE teachers, or whoever it is.

Do you realize the enormity of the task to take the word of God and to bring it to 21st century mankind? That is the task that lies in front of us.

[22 : 44] There is no easy task whatsoever. But it is what we've been commanded to do. Let us remember to pray for those who teach God's word.

Let us remember the responsibility that God has placed upon us. Fourthly, I want you to notice how it spoke to them. Verse 9, Then Nehemiah the governor, Hezbollah the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them, 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 I want you to notice that this is the point that marks out God's word from every other piece of literature.

they wept as they read it. Now perhaps you have read a book at some point in your life or at maybe several points in your life and that book, the content, the story of that book, the emotional content, it might be a narrative, it might be a love story, a romance, and it might be so powerful and so moving that it has brought you to tears.

because you have become so involved in the story that you're reading, because you feel for the people involved, whether they are fictional or real, you become involved in the story so much so that it has moved you and affected you to tears.

[24 : 16] but that's not what we read here. That is not how the Bible affects someone. The Bible comes to someone not with another story, an objective story.

The Bible comes to someone as God speaking to me. It is the living, the powerful, the personal Word of God. In the Bible, we are not spectators again.

We are not impassive spectators watching and listening to something that has gone on 2,000 or 3,000 or 4,000 years ago and really not involved in any way.

Whenever we pick up the Bible, we must always remember that this is the Word, the personal Word of the personal God. And those people began to weep because they worshipped.

Those people began to weep because they determined in their heart to listen, to say with the psalmist, I will hear what God the Lord will say. And whenever you do that, be prepared for God to speak to you, even to the point of tears.

[25 : 28] Indeed, it is a healthy sign. When is the last time that we were moved to tears as we were affected by some aspect in God's Word?

When is the last time that we became so troubled as these people were about our own lives, our own disobediences, our own unfaithfulness? When is the last time that we have allowed ourselves to become broken by God's Word?

May it be that we never become so familiar with the Word of God that we refuse to be affected by it anymore. May it never be that we simply hold a form of religion but deny the power of that religion. May it never be that our faith becomes simply a form where there's no voice, there is no emotion, there is no personal dealings between a personal God and ourselves.

How can you, how can we listen to God's Word speaking to us, touching the areas of our lives that need to be touched without us being affected?

[26 : 46] Do you know this evening how important the Bible is? God's message to us. Have you ever realized that this is the Word that could mean the difference between eternal life and eternal death?

Every time you read the Word of God perhaps it's on your bookshelf. Perhaps the only time you ever open it is when you come into church, when you hear it read and what you've lost sight of is the sheer vitality and the importance of that Bible.

Do you know what it means that as we said this morning, that the second person of the Godhead became man and he came into the world and that he died on a cross? Do you know what it means? Not just for the world but for you.

Have you come to faith? Have you come to be touched by God himself as he speaks to you in that word? Or are you so hardened to it? Have you so determined within your own life to resist every attempt that God makes to speak to us in his word?

But lastly, I want you to notice how they went away. in verse 10, go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks. Now this was all involved in what they called the fellowship offering, which was the last in a series of offerings that the people, the Israelites would make.

[28 : 09] There was the sin offering, the burnt offering, and lastly came the fellowship offering. And the whole point about the fellowship offering was that they were able to take part in what was sacrificed.

They were able to eat the actual sacrifice. And it was most significant. They went away eating and drinking. Now you might well say, well, why?

Because surely those people were weeping and they should have every right to weep. They were guilty of all the sins that they had committed against God. God had punished them for their sins and now he was reminding them of where they stood before him and they were brought into a situation of worship and they were reminded of how they had failed him.

So they should be weeping, we might say. But that's not what God said to them. He said, go your way and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to the Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. this is an often quoted verse from the Bible.

[29 : 23] It's a wonderful verse and it is a source of strength to all of God's people in every age. Why was it that they went away eating and drinking?

Well, I'll tell you. Because the time for God's anger with his people was now past. They had now repented. They had now been restored to the Lord.

God's anger. And the time for God's anger, as long as we are in this life, is a limited time. Whenever we repent and come to God in faith and in prayer, whenever we turn away from everything that God has against us, whenever we in the context of the New Testament confess our sins and lay hold upon the blood of Jesus Christ to cleanse us, to wash us from all our sins as we're promised in the New Testament, then we're told that God's anger will pass away.

And what we're told is this, that we must rejoice. We're commanded to rejoice in the Lord. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

And it is very important that we don't end the chapter in tears, because there's no strength in a time of mourning. There is, however, strength for the Christian in a time of sharing in the joy of the Lord.

[30 : 52] Now I want you to notice several features about this, and I'm conscious of the time. First of all, this day is sacred to the Lord. It wasn't as if the worship is now finished, the solemn part is now finished, the serious part has come to an end, now go and rejoice.

Their rejoicing, their feasting, their eating and drinking was part of the solemnity of the occasion. It was part of the sacredness of the occasion.

The sacredness had not come to an end. Their eating and drinking, their giving to those who didn't have, their rejoicing, their fulfilling all of God's requirements, was part of God's commands to them and part of the sacredness of the day.

Now, what are we to make of this? Well, I want to suggest to you just one thing. I want to suggest to you that their eating and drinking was covenantal.

I've said to you before that God's dealings with the people of Israel was by way of covenant. First of all, with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob when he pledged himself to be the God of the Israelites, when he promised himself to be their God and they were to be his people.

[32 : 08] Now, what used to happen in the Old Testament whenever a covenant was established between two parties or two people was always that there was a meal. The two parties would sit down and they would ratify, if you like, they would confirm that covenant by way of a meal.

God's and that is what I would suggest to you part of the significance of the sacred meals in the Old Testament and the sacred meals in the New Testament.

For example, we have the Passover. The people were commanded not just to sacrifice the lamb, but they were to eat the lamb. They were eating in the very presence of God.

They were eating, they were receiving at the same time God's deliverance and his salvation. They were eating to commemorate and to celebrate and to eat and drink with the Lord himself, the very God who saved them.

And then secondly, as the Bible goes on, I want you to remember that there is another instance in which we have in Exodus chapter 24, a slightly more intriguing passage, but Moses and Medab and Abihu 70 elders of Israel going up Mount Sinai and they ate and they drank in the presence, in the very presence of God.

[33 : 37] And year after year they would celebrate the Passover feast as a commemoration of their relationship to God and his deliverance of them coming out of Egypt.

But it goes on in the New Testament. We read it in John chapter 6, when the Son of God himself came into the world as a man, when he fed the 5,000, I believe that there is much significance in this.

It wasn't simply God's provision for their hunger. It was a mark, it was a testimony of God being reconciled to man. God coming into the world to save sinners and to dwell amongst them.

This was a foretaste, if you like, of the ultimate, the ultimate heaven itself, where God's dwelling is going to be amongst men. And to celebrate and to mark that occasion, there was a feast, there was an eating and a drinking with God himself in the presence of God.

And as we move on to Revelation, we have an eating and a drinking to mark the end of time and to mark the fulfillment of all things when we have the marriage supper of the Lamb.

[34 : 44] It is covenantal, God's covenant dealings with his people. But not only were they commanded to eat and drink, but they were commanded to rejoice.

But it was a particular rejoicing. He said this, the joy of the Lord is your strength. The joy of the Lord. Now what is the joy of the Lord?

What is the joy of the Lord? It wasn't simply a joy that fell upon the people as a result of what God had done for them. Well it certainly was, that's true, but there's more to it than that.

Because it was deeper, it was deeper than simply joy as a consequence of what God had done for them. It was a joy, I would suggest to you, that lies first and foremost in the presence, in the being of God himself.

God is the God of joy. There is joy in the presence of the angels. joy is the hallmark of God himself.

[35 : 51] Joy is one of those conditions that exist between father and son and spirit. And so when the prophet speaks about the joy of the Lord, he's talking about God's joy that is shared with men and women.

Let me prove it to you from the New Testament. when the prodigal son came home to the father, you remember that when Jesus, it was the father who said, rejoice with me, he said, there is joy in the presence of the angels over every sinner that repents.

And you remember what he said to the servant, enter into the joy of the Lord. joy is a hallmark of the Christian life.

It is the fruit of the spirit as Paul gives it to us in Galatians. He says, love, joy, peace. In other words, we are not to think of some Christians being joyful and other Christians not being joyful.

Joy is the fruit of the spirit. It is as important as love. It is as important as goodness. It is as important as self-control. It is a gift. It is an attribute of God shared with us.

[37 : 15] We have been brought into the joy of the fellowship of God himself. So, therefore, it is no wonder that it is a strength to God's people.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. It is a strength as we go out, I hope, to meet the challenges that face us during this week.

Do we go out in the joy and the strength of the Lord as a God who has received us to himself fully, as a God who holds nothing against us and he has not withheld himself for us?

Do you know that as you go out tomorrow to your place of work, to all the difficulties that meet you, you go out not alone, but with a God who is all-powerful, eternal in the heavens, on your side.

You can go out and say, if God be for us, who can be against us? You can go out and you can say, I go out with that God who has nothing against me. He doesn't even hold my sin against me.

[38 : 17] Even after everything I've done against him, all my unfaithfulness, all my evil, wicked thoughts, all the sin that I've been guilty of, even in the last day or so, even the last two days, I have come to him and I have received forgiveness and acceptance from that God who assures me that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

Can you go out in that joy tomorrow, tonight? Can you go out of this place having met with God, having listened to his word, having spent the day in the presence of God, having rested both physically and spiritually in the presence of your God who is your Savior?

That's what the joy of the Lord is. The joy of sins forgiven. Has God forgiven you your sins? Can you go to sleep tonight knowing that whatever happens to you, even if you should die tonight and be taken into eternity itself, that you are closed with the salvation that God can give you through faith in Jesus Christ.

I can't think of a greater source of joy than that. Do you have that joy within your soul? Knowing that whatever meets you, whatever trouble, whatever circumstance, the joy of the Lord is not dependent on circumstances.

It's not something that's going to be up on a high one day and down in a low the next. It's the joy that says even although you go through what job and who knows what suffering job had to suffer.

[39 : 52] Even as he buried the last of his children, even as he saw his house destroyed and everything that was his destroyed, you know what he said? He said, blessed be the name of the Lord.

It was a joy that could be shaken but never taken away. Do you have that joy within your heart tonight?

A joy of knowing and serving and loving your God, your God as the God who has loved you and given himself for you. May it be so with all of us this evening.

close enough. When I ■ Aí to go Pis in a world, you sont warnings but also Wrong Replication is Slovenia is FilmJack■■ to Paul for you to see a world may making the namewife time to