

Nehemiah 8:1-12

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[0 : 00] Again, the scripture text is Nehemiah 8, 1 through 12, on page 444 of the White Bibles. Please stand for the reading of God's word.

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. And beside him stood Mattathiah, Shema, Eneah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseah on his right hand, and Pideah, Mishael, Mechijah, Hashum, Hashbadanah, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

[1 : 14] 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. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.

And all the people answered, Amen, Amen. Lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

Also, Joshua, Benai, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akub, Shabbathai, Hodiah, Maaseah, Kalaita, Azariah, Josabed, Hanan, Peleah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places.

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 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.

[2 : 28] 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. To what purpose do people build churches?

To what purpose would they rebuild churches? What can we learn about the purposes behind refurbishing a church building from what Israel did when their own walls were erected?

To what purpose will we commit significant resources, time, effort, and labor to restore an architecturally significant building in an educationally and culturally important neighborhood in this city?

[4 : 27] To what end? Within a two-year time period, we will be located at 62nd and Woodlawn in what was St. John the Baptist Temple.

That building was put on its foundation in 1916. It was called the Ninth Church of Christian Scientists.

It wasn't occupied by St. John the Baptist Temple until 1958. We will be the third family in that edifice.

Knowing that it was built by Mary Baker Eddy's religionists under the name Christian Scientists, we know the purpose for which it was built.

Mary Baker Eddy, in the late 19th century, early 20th century, constructed a religion that flourished in this country for the better part of 50 years.

[5 : 51] And it proliferated largely in educated contexts like Boston or Chicago and Chicago's South Side with moneyed individuals who had adhered to her notion that most of physical sickness was an illusion and that the physical malaise that we are under can be overcome, done away with, through not just science-forward-looking motion, but through this private, spiritualized prayer.

That prayer and readings would enable one to overcome physical malaise. That is the purpose for which that building was put up.

Interestingly, by the end of the Second World War, the Christian science movement in this country fell off the face of the map.

I suppose two world wars had convinced the citizenry of our country that physical suffering was not an illusion.

But that there was an inherent problem within human nature that this would not solve. Prayers to overcome a material world, elevating a spiritual understanding, had fallen flat.

[7 : 40] Around the same time period, other buildings went up around the country. If you've seen Rockefeller Chapel, which is two blocks north of our building, it was erected in the year 1930 with oil money, John D. Rockefeller.

The same year Rockefeller opened Rockefeller Chapel, they also opened Riverside Church in Manhattan under the same man of money.

Riverside Church was occupied by a pastor by the name of Fosdick. And he felt clearly that the purpose of the Christian religion was to enable one in life practice to get on your way with a better sense of well-being.

That was the purpose for which it was put up. For what purpose will we rebuild St. John the Baptist Temple?

I wonder if we can learn a couple things by this eighth chapter in Nehemiah. Because we begin to see what they gave themselves to in a post-campaign world.

[9 : 18] This chapter, at the opening, begins with, Let's just call them Church of the Watergate.

Or the Watergate Church. They had labored hard for a place in which the people could come and dwell securely.

And now we begin to see through their activity the end or the purpose for which they built. Look what it says.

They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law 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.

It seems to me that from this chapter we can surmise the purpose or a purpose for which they built. Namely, to assemble themselves around the reading of God's Word.

[10 : 39] That's a striking intention. Israel had a unique adherence to Moses' revelation now written down.

And that revelation was the very voice of God. So that if you or I had been a member of Watergate Church we would come as God's people into God's place and require notice that wonderful phrase they told Ezra to bring the book.

To bring the book. Of course it would have been a scroll. It would have been unrolled. And all the people had a hunger to hear God's Word.

This is very significant. They believed that when God's Word was read God's voice was heard. I think of later John Wesley that wonderful English evangelist and reformer says I want to know one thing the way to heaven God himself have condescended to teach the way he hath written it down in a book oh give me that book at any price give me the book of God.

That was their intention to listen to the Word read. Notice who was there verse 3 the men and the women and all who could understand.

[12 : 37] That little phrase all who could understand is going to occur again in verse 3 all who could understand. In fact the whole chapter is going to fall under the weight of a desire of all the people to come to an understanding of that Word.

You'll see it there at the end of verse 8 the people understood or at the end of verse 12 they were now rejoicing because they had understood. So the purposes for which Jerusalem was reconstituted in some measure is in play when we see the first things they are doing.

They are gathering to hear the Word of the Lord read as many who as I can understand for the purpose of understanding because in understanding God's Word in listening well one would learn how to live.

all who could understand this is let me just stop on this for just a second this is why if you're third grade here we ask you to stay for the sermon it's not that a second grader can't understand anything but we do believe that from second grade on down while you're part of this worshiping community there's a moment where the Word is actually read and then explained for the purpose of understanding that we feel you as a second grader or beneath would be better suited to go where other people can teach you how to read the Word at that level but if you're third grade we want you here we think you can understand everything I'm saying today from third grade on up this is also the reason though that we have a nursery for infants now I know when you have an infant you want your infant with you and

I had five of them believe me and in one sense that's easy but there's also an element where where we have already put people in place to care for children infancy so that an adult can actually for 30 minutes a week be cleared of that responsibility so they can hear so even now as I'm speaking to you somebody is in a nursery reading the Bible every week we ask them to read the Bible to infants reading the Bible loving them but also wanting this assembly to be undivided and unconcerned and undistracted it is a gift it is a gift to every young parent to for 30 minutes simply be under the hearing reading of the word they were listening to it notice verse 5 this unique thing they were also standing out of respect for it verse 5 and Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was above all the people you know they'd put him on a rostrum a lectern and he opened it it says as he opened it all the people stood and

[16:03] Ezra blessed the Lord the great God and all the people answered amen amen lifting up their hands and bowing down their heads in worship this is really interesting there's a sense then that they felt that the hearing just hearing the Bible read was an act of worship and as an act of worship they stood as it was read you probably have wondered what's the weird thing at Holy Trinity and what will be Christ church God why did everyone stand up they get up there and tell me to stand up before they read the Bible is that because they know my blood flow is already slowing down and the preacher wants to wake me up a little bit so I can sit through his 30 minute deal no no that's not it it's not some clever technique to move you around to keep your blood energy up it is from right here this verse there's a sense where we are trying to mirror their heart response imagine a ruler walking into your presence and preparing to speak there's a sense where you would stand there was a day when a man would stand when a woman would enter into their presence and approach a table call it what you want we just called it honor respect there was a day when you would stand in the presence of an elder who walked into your midst and by that

I mean someone who was elderly there was a day when those who were more aged in the community or the city had a respect because of their agedness and there was a respect that would stand and in this same way when one considers that the ancient of days the one who stood on the foundation and threshold of heaven and created the earth and all of its creative forces through the speaking of a word one would stand so when we stand or I should say when they stood they did so as an act of worship they felt I am getting ready to hear God speak we don't think of it that way but that's that's that's the way they felt the word read is the very voice of the living

God and notice they responded amen amen see there's already a call and response going now we got a ton to learn from call and response in our own country but let me tell you something this call and response is actually you need to learn a little bit of that in preaching too but but at any way we'll let you go on this today but the call and response was this engagement one with the other and the word at the center so when I'm preaching you today I always leave my Bible's edges over the front end of this why because I don't want you to think that you're hearing from me I want you and me to both know that our relationship with God is mediated through what's written down here side and I could memorize my sermons and wow the congregant I don't walk anymore why because I want this inscripturated text to be the focus of our attention it is amazing there's a moment when Whitefield was preaching in Scotland and he announced his text and as he announced his text he heard quote the rustling made by the opening of Bibles all at once and he says it quite surprised me a scene I never was witnessed to before what is he saying it's getting a little tougher with the phones I know somebody needed to create an app that every time you scroll on your Bible text I'm hearing the rustling of pages I mean that that that's what a preacher needs to know that that you are

scrolling with this over 30 to 35 minutes a week and that you respond to this that you are engaged in this this is why you know it might sound weird you might go man

I'm in this church I don't know what they're doing I've never gone to church before she got done reading the Bible and when she got done she said this is the word of the Lord and all these people seemed to know what they were supposed to do they all said thanks be to God why do we do that right here right here we want the reader to say this is the word of the Lord you may not understand it but you affirm thanks be to God I mean!

[21 : 45] that's! amen and amen amen literally means let it be so someone reads the word this is the word of the Lord let it be let that be amen amen it ought to rise as a as a boisterous unified collective heartfelt response and that's it this is the word of the Lord thanks be to God we hear from him having heard from everyone else and their brother through the week I have finally come to an assembly where I can hear from God the rustling of the pages the rustling of the pages they find them gathering then around the word we find them listening to the word we find them standing in respect for the word we find them verbally giving affirmation from the word all of these things are there we find them considering that the word itself is an act of worship the lifting of their hands the bowing of their heads the falling on their faces in other words they were enlivened by the word but notice this there was also a collective need for somebody to be explaining the word that's in the text if you look at verses 7 and 8 there were these preachers in residence they were those in training and as the word went out from

Ezra it says that they helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places they read from the book of the law it says clearly and they gave the sense so that the people understood this is kind of nice to know!

because a lot of times when you read the Bible you say I have no idea what this means you are not alone that is kind of the collective response but what happens is the word which goes forth is given some explanation in the old day they would have called it explication you might even think of it as interpretation the very language here talks about laying something down side by side think of the word of!

as a massive loaf of bread that is too big to eat and the role of the preacher the role of the explainer is to take it bit by bit so that you might have a word from God today that's what they did they were someone who was explaining it and look what happened when that explanation came when the explanation came and they understood it they began to weep verse nine for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law in other words when you and I opened the Bible and it's read and explained there's going to be things that challenge us concerning our own life our own adherence to it our own ability to keep it or even just a long a heart longing to have been a different person because of it and yet now you got years on you now you got decades on you now you got I've been away a long time on you and there's a sense of regret there's a sense of loss there's a sense of measure that is not met but but but but but I love what these brothers said to them in verse 10 go on 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 that when you hear God speak even when the even when the weight falls it's a weight that he graciously rolls off you have understanding and you ask him for his strength you you actually begin to garner his joy and for what purposes because they had understood the words that were declared to them think of a think of a triangle you got this triangle in your mind a big old triangle with four layers the guys in the bottom level they are unconsciously incompetent they don't know what they don't know that's most of us whenever we open the

[27 : 15] Bible we think we know what's going on but we don't how much better to move up a level to be somebody who is consciously incompetent that's a good place to be when it comes to reading the Bible I am consciously incompetent I know I need some help I know I need to go sit in the living room I have to talk with other people who heard that message I have to go look again!

because praise God I once thought I knew everything going on in the world and I came to church and they read the Bible I thought I knew the Bible I didn't know the first thing about the Bible I was unconsciously incompetent better to be consciously incompetent better than that to be what consciously competent now I see you coming up that you coming up the triangle you make a personal growth the they are the ones you don't want to be in Bible study with because not only do they got it right they don't know how they got it right they got nothing they can give you you like man how'd you see that how'd you see that they're like I don't know man it's just you know just my I

got good instinct good instinct!

rate they understood and therefore they rejoiced let me shut this down why to what purpose will we rebuild St.

John the Baptist temple why will the glory be ours to restore a 56 foot and a half diameter stained glass dome why will we attempt by God's grace to bring millions of dollars to the neighborhood to gift back to the neighborhood something that was always theirs why what will we do when we walk in those doors here it is we will restore an architecturally significant building on Chicago south side by the grace and strength of God and we will do it because we are in a culturally and educationally significant community this gift is to the whole city and it is for the purpose that we would have a home for the proclamation of God's word that's what we're doing we want a home for the proclamation of God's word not merely sermon listening but from infancy to old age from the dedication of your child to the funeral procession in which we walk you out to the weddings that will take place to the events that will be hosted to the music that will be offered to the community that will be welcomed nothing less than a home for the proclamation of

God's word you know and let me shut it down I told you I would early 20th century there was another church in Manhattan that wanted to do something for God by way of a church building the pastor of that church was named MacArthur and he rebuilt they moved up to near 57th between 6th and 7th this place called Calvary Memorial Baptist Church and on the front of it they inscribed we preach Christ crucified and when they talked to him about what he thought he was doing because the cost was extraordinary he says something to the effect of we are going to put a sermon in stone in other words the building itself was going to preach I like that for the next two years we are about the rhetoric of space as my son put it to me

[32 : 10] I said what he said dad I took him through the building he goes you know what you're doing for the next two years I said I don't know what you tell me he says you're doing the rhetoric of space I said the rhetoric of space that sounds great but I need understanding it's the persuasive use of space for the purposes of God that he can speak we can hear and therefore live in love both of him and of our neighbor as our self is there anything more exciting than that I don't think so I can't believe we get to be part of it somebody told me they have not seen in our project they have not seen in this community since the 1930s a project of such spiritual significance dynamic energy for the welfare of the city than this engagement you stand

I'm not saying they're right I'm just saying that was their perception but you stand at a once in a lifetime opportunity to be a part of something that we can gather around the word hear it read hear it explained come to understanding and celebrate with joy our heavenly father we've looked at this long enough today send us on our way now having heard from you and do it with joy and lord bless the work of our hands may the good hand of the lord be upon us in jesus name amen and all god's people said amen all right let's get on our feet