

Nehemiah 8:13-18

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Preacher: Bing Nieh

[0 : 00] Nehemiah chapter 8 verses 13 through 18. And it reads like this. On the second day, the heads of fathers' houses of all the people with the priests and the Levites came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the word of the law.

And they found it written in the law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel shall dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem.

Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olives, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths as it is written.

So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on its roof. And in their courts and in the courts of the house of God and in the square at the water gate and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and live in the booths. For from the day of Jeshua, the son of Nun, to that day the people of Israel had not done so.

[1 : 22] And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days.

And on the eighth day, there was a solemn assembly according to the rule. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Father, we pray with the psalmist.

Father, we pray with the psalmist. That your testimonies are wonderful. Therefore, our soul keeps them.

The unfolding of your word. Your words give life and light. Impart understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant because I long for your commandments.

So, Father, turn and be gracious to us. May the unfolding of your words give light. To this end we pray.

[2 : 44] Amen. How do you shape a nation? More specifically, how do you shape the identity of a people?

My sister recently became a dual citizen of the United States of America and Great Britain. She's been living in the UK for some time now, having married an Englishman.

And given that reality, there's a few differences between the American and the Englishman. And one of the early discoveries that I made was the difference in holiday celebrations.

Humorously, on July 4th, I think almost every year, I always ask him, Hey, what are you up to on this day? He replies, he celebrates the good Britons of America on that day.

On other occasions, my sister tells me of holidays that she celebrates in Britain. Days like Boxing Day, which I'm not sure what it is yet.

[3 : 52] But all that to say, the calendar is arguably one of the most distinctive elements of a nation's identity. I can say Lunar New Year.

And immediately, associations go to ethnicities and cultures that might hold to it. I could say Yom Kippur, and you would think of a people. See, holidays, commemorative days, independence days, festivals, honorary days, vary from nation to nation.

For they are all significant to those who identify with a particular flag. Calendars form identity.

How one spends and allocates their time will shape the type of person they become.

This morning, we've read a text that highlights such an instance. A commemorative feast for the people of Israel. Yet the text is doing far more than that, than simply recording for us Israel's festive celebration.

[5 : 02] It is showing us the formation of a distinct people. God's people. Flowing from last week's text, we asserted that with our anticipated move down to Woodlawn, we would be a place that holds out the Word of God so that Jesus could be known.

And this week, I want to assert to you that we want to be a people that hold to the Word of God so that Jesus can be seen.

Chapter 8 holds for us this model as a church going forward. Christ Church Chicago will be a place that holds out the Word of God so that Jesus can be known.

Christ Church Chicago will be a congregation that holds to the Word of God so that Jesus can be seen. Jesus is seen when God's people live out God's Word.

Jesus is seen when God's people live out God's Word. This morning, my desire is for us to see that clearly. That as the people of God live out the Word of God, they are shaped and formed.

[6 : 18] We live by this book, this instruction guide, our user's manual, our code of conduct. And this morning's text, I've divided it into two.

Two parts, we'll see it. A command discovered. Maybe you also put a command recovered in verses 13 to 15. And it's followed by a command applied in verses 16 to 18.

A command discovered followed by a command applied. The entirety of chapter 8 is an interconnected unit. Last week, we spent some time on the first day of the seventh month.

You see that in chapter 8, verse 2. And this morning, we enter into the second day, according to verse 13. We are coming off the heels of a monumental day for the people.

It was significant. And it was highlighted by the people's exchange of grief for joy. Perhaps the most well-known verse in the Bible we read, or in Nehemiah, we read last week.

[7 : 23] Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. You see, joy will undergird this entire chapter. It reemerges in verse 17 for us this morning.

And now it's the second day of the seventh month, the text tells us. After the first day, of which I will call like an all-day Bible conference. Six hours they were going at it, some say.

And now on the second day, it intensifies. They have already received an entire day of instruction. And now, according to verse 13, they are back for more.

Granted, it's no longer all the people. It's actually specified to note the heads of households, along with the priests and Levites. In other words, it's an assembly of leaders coming around Ezra.

And they are not only looking to hear the book of the law read and explained, but they have come to study the words of the law. They're assembling to give attention, to consider, to ponder the words of the law.

[8 : 32] It's a separate and distinct time of study devoted to acting prudently in regards to figuring out what the Word says.

The text describes for us an intensity of engagement with the Word. If the first day of the conference was a corporate worship gathering like ours this morning, the second day is a hands-on class.

If day one was receiving the Word, day two is seizing the Word. The pictures seem to move us from passive activity to active engagement.

And in some way, we are imitators of this model in this church, because all of our ministries seem to revolve around the study of the Word. Prior to this academic school year, I spent some time in our offices with five collegiate workers in the Chicagoland area.

They lead ministries at various universities. And they asked me a question, Bing, what is it that you do that's so special? And I said, well, I'm not sure it's special, but we study the Bible.

[9 : 57] That's it? Yeah, and I pulled out a copy of last year's Scripture Journal. I took the university students through the Book of Mark, and I said, this is what we do. We read it, sit under it, write about it, talk about it, discuss it.

And I remember, the five of them looked at me and said, does that work? Because we haven't found that, one person said, to be effective on our campus.

Our students aren't interested in the Bible. Wow, Bing, you must have some special students, which I do. And in my head, I was thinking, wow.

Wow. If I didn't give out the Bible, what can I possibly give to them? And I'm pleased to say, at least for our university ministry, what are we doing?

We're studying Romans. What are our children doing? Well, they're pacing alongside us, studying Nehemiah. And if you walk down the hall, you'll see it. Because there's a bunch of tents in the hallway.

[11 : 09] And all the kids are asking, what's up with these tents? If you hang out with our youth, what are they doing? Oh, we're studying Galatians.

We're studying Revelation. If you hang out with our women's ministry this summer, what are they doing? We're studying Hebrews. That's it? Does that work? At least.

For Ezra, it worked. And for us, it'll work. At each of these gatherings, we seek to hear from the book and study the book. And as they studied, they came to a place in the law that prescribed the particular feast, the Feast of the Booths.

The Feast of the Booths was prescribed to begin on the 15th day of the seventh month. We have to know that, of course, now is the second day of that month. And here they are. It's not difficult to imagine the opportunity for immediate application.

But for us modern readers, we have to pause and ask, what in the world is the Feast of Booths? It seems like a distant and obscure celebration, so it's worth our time to ask, what was Israel commemorating?

[12 : 19] What's the meaning behind the week-long festival? The Feast of Booths arguably was the most popular festival in the Jewish calendar.

Josephus actually records it that way. It's the greatest and holiest feast of the Jews. The feast came at the end of the harvest year in the fall, when the labors of the field were all gathered in.

It was a time of rejoicing, Deuteronomy tells us, where the people would celebrate God's bountiful provision through the land. They would give thanks for the harvest.

And over time, it picked up more meaning. They would give thanks to God for being the source of the rain. It takes on its significance, since we've been in John's Gospel earlier. Remember when Jesus comes during the Feast of the Booths.

And it's during the water pouring, the thanksgiving of God bringing water, that Jesus says, Oh yeah, I am the living water. I am the source of water.

[13 : 20] Yet this feast goes beyond merely celebrating God the provider. This feast also serves as a reenactment. Leviticus commissions the people to collect branches.

Leviticus 23, to collect branches from various trees and to construct booths or tents, where they were to stay for seven days. Where all of life was to pause.

There would be no work, only rest and celebration. Leviticus reads, you shall dwell in the booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in the booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.

I am the Lord your God. Israel was therefore commanded to commemorate their wilderness wanderings, for in keeping the festival, the people would be reminded of how the Lord had protected them as they wandered in the wilderness.

So the celebration of the Feast of the Booth sustained the collective memory of the people. It reminded them that they were a divinely delivered people. They were a divinely provided for people.

[14 : 35] And they are a divinely protected people. As pagan nations around them ordered their festivities and their calendars according to agrarian cycles or lunar cycles.

Israel was to be a people that celebrated in response to divine action and command.

Israel's calendar was God-shaped. I use a digital calendar because life is so busy.

And every now and then, because I share my calendar with my beloved wife, you know, I'll pull up my calendar and there it is. Four notifications. Four additions to the calendar.

And we can think of it in this way. That for Israel, they received notification early on. Fix these dates. In your year.

[15 : 41] They were to, because they're specifically designated to be a holy time set apart, distinguished, and established by God himself.

God had revealed a calendar for Israel to keep. But it's more than just the implementation of holidays and festivals. Because the God of the Bible is making a claim in doing this.

It's not just the formation of patterns and rhythms in the life of God's people. It's not merely to be festive and jubilant. It goes farther and deeper than this.

Because for you and I, the immediate contemporary correlation is, oh, that's what I do during Christmas time. That's what I do during Easter time. And I applaud those every year who champion those dates to reclaim what they mean and their significance for the Christian faith.

And I commend their valiant efforts. But this is more substantial than that. Because in establishing, let me say this clearly, in establishing Israel's calendar, God is asserting his rightful claim over time.

[16 : 56] God is asserting his sovereignty over time. When he lays out Israel's calendar, he is certainly building a memory, a collective memory for them in his delivering power, his gracious protection, and his ongoing provision.

But what he is establishing is that he is sovereign. And we often think of sovereignty as spatial. He's sovereign over my finances.

He's sovereign over the natural world. He's sovereign over my health. He's sovereign over my goods and my circumstances. And this passage lays out, God is not only sovereign over the spatial, he is sovereign over the temporal.

The God of Israel is sovereign both over physical and temporal. There is no facet of your existence that God does not claim is all his.

The psalmist is correct in saying the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. And we think of the earth and everything. But we also need to be reminded when the psalmist says, my times are in your hands.

[18 : 14] You see, the Lord exercises his sovereign rule over our time. And how does the church apply this?

Well, we recognize two things. That there ought to be commemorative reminders of our Christian identity. There ought to be rhythms and habits in our calendar that remind us of our Christian identity.

And secondly, there ought to be calibrating features that configure us under God's sovereign rule. And this differs from the church east and west. It differs across denomination and practice.

I know for some of us this Lenten season is of great significance. And for others, we may ask, what is Lent? But all that to say, Paul understood.

He said, one person esteems this day as better. Other people esteem all days alike. And his conclusion is this, that when you live, when you die, you all live and die to the Lord.

[19 : 26] And what he's saying there is regardless of how your calendar looks, it better be stewarded to honor God. In the trivial or the significant.

In the mundane or the exceptional. In the laundering of clothes. or in the leading of children. Every second can be oriented under the lordship of the Lord Jesus.

Make each moment count. For each moment counts. And can count. Well, we see a command discovered.

And now we see a command applied. And so the leaders looked at their calendars and they were going to make it count. The leaders concluded quickly that they could take measures to obey the divine command and enact the feast immediately.

They soon were summoning all to come under the law and command as it is written at the end of verse 15. They were not going to merely hear the word, but they were going to do the word.

[20 : 34] They would not just be content with understanding the word. They sought to apply the word. And verses 15 and 16 highlight their activity. The word was broadcast widely.

The law was announced widely. And people responded thoroughly. And if we were to read the book chronologically, it's quite astounding. For we know in chapter 7 that the people's houses weren't even fully constructed.

And here they are. With no homes for themselves, they began making makeshift tents, reenacting God's dealing with their ancestors in the desert wanderings.

And build, they did. You see it. They built upon private structures that were standing. They built in neighborhood courtyards. They built in religious spaces.

All in verse 16. They built in public spaces. They went to people's rooftops and built. They went to the shared neighborhood courtyard and built. They went to the water gate, the public space, and they built.

[21 : 38] They went to the gate of, they went to the religious, yeah, they went to religious square and built.

They built everywhere. Why? Because their obedience to the command was to be thorough. And wherever the people found themselves, they obeyed.

Wherever the Lord had set them down, they constructed tents here, tents there, tents everywhere. And as they recovered this commemorative practice, they received significant joy according to the end of verse 17.

What was neglected was now restored, and there was great rejoicing. The feast was not only to be commemorative, but celebratory. And what caused this joy?

What brought this joy? Well, it seemed to come from the obedience and the fact that they applied the law that they studied. You see, this section is tied up with that little phrase at the end.

[22 : 42] They did all these things. And the end of verse 18, you can underline it in your scripture journals, they did it according to the rule.

In other words, what Nehemiah wanted you to know is what transpired here is not some novel idea that leaders dreamt up together.

this was not a new fad, but it was a retrieval of what God had already given to his people for their ongoing preservation, formation, and joy.

See, my sense is that joy erupted out of the obedient application of God's word. Well, I sometimes see it. I see it in the approach that my children have to me when I announce a law or give a word of instruction and they scamper off.

They apply the law and they come back. And their response to me, their look to me, is knowing mom and dad would be happy, they return expressing how they obeyed and complied to the instruction.

[23 : 58] instruction. Why? Because in them they understand obedience to the word brings not only joy to the source, but it actually stimulates joy in the person.

See, the Bible is not only to be a book that is studied and understood, but it is a book that must be applied when understood. When it is obeyed and applied, it yields the fruit of joy in our lives.

That's why Psalm 119, where's Psalm 119? There it went missing.

Psalm 119, 111 to 113 reads this way. Listen to what the psalmist says, because he gets it. your testimonies are my heritage forever.

Your word is my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever to the end.

[25 : 13] Why? Because in our applied obedience, we find joy. We know that at this time, the people of God did not live in insular communities.

given that they were returning from exile, they were adjusting to life among the mixed religious population. And as a result, their distinctive obedience would be for them a witness to their identity as God's people.

Nehemiah is underway. He's restored a wall, a place for God's people. people. And he jots this now down for you and I, the reader, to demonstrate the recovery of the identity of God's people.

Nehemiah knows that the holiness of a place is contingent upon the holiness of the people. A holy people are a people who live distinct from those around them. And this distinctiveness, the King James says, this peculiar people, would in turn prove to be a witness to the God who delivers, provides, and protects.

You see, these people were to be a kingdom of priests before the watching world. They were serving as small conduits between humanity and heaven.

[26 : 37] And imagine with me, because it's not far-fetched to think along these lines, and I actually take it from chapter 10, a merchant arrives, to the city walls of Jerusalem.

There he is, fascinated. What is this? Why are those people on the roof? What's all this color?

Why are all these people in my way? And lo and behold, what he finds, he comes, it's quite bizarre, and he says, I've come to trade. I have wood from Lebanon, and I would like some of this well-known olive oil that you have in this region.

And as he engages in transaction, he finds out these people aren't working for seven days. Why are you not working for seven days?

God told you to do this? That's absurd, because my God has me working incessantly, relentlessly, enslaved by these hours.

[27 : 43] I have no time. I'm constantly busy. The pace is unrelenting. And your God gives you a break for seven days? And there it is.

Well, let me tell you about this God who gives rest, this God who gives breaks, this God who structures my calendar. See, God's people are shaped by obedience.

We are formed as we apply God's word. God's people live out God's words and instructions. And in so doing, there is not only joy, but witness.

And I'll close with this. In a recent conversation I had with a university student, they shared with me what the most difficult challenge of their day was.

In my mind, I was thinking, oh, it has to be their study, because their field is, I don't know, their field is very complex. In my mind, I was thinking it was complicated colleagues or friends.

[28 : 52] Maybe it was shortage of finances. And I was shocked to hear what this student told me. This student shared with me that the challenge, that they, the greatest challenge they have every day of being Christian, was deciding whether or not they would pray at lunch.

And they shared with me, being I routinely eat with my colleagues, my friends, and in that moment I have to decide. Do I pause, bow my head, and identify with the Lord of Heaven, or do I just scantily go along with the conversation consume, saving my reputation.

Every day, they battle. Every day, they figure out, is it worth living for the Lord Jesus?

Is it worth living to publicly live out the exhortation to pray and to give thanks? peace? So it is, for all of us, is it not?

Is there a facet of your life where you're given an opportunity, maybe in your schedule, maybe in your posture, maybe in your conversation?

[30 : 23] What's interesting about prayer is it's the most visible thing that you're a Christian. is there something you can do that bears witness?

Because we don't necessarily hold festivals. We don't necessarily take weeks off from work to worship. But we are given opportunities in our calendar to pause and to bear witness.

There's a command recovered, a command applied, and so in chapter 8, what we see is this model that Christ Church Chicago will be a place that holds out the word of God so that Jesus can be known.

And Christ Church Chicago will be a place that holds to the word of God so that Jesus can be seen. Father, we come to you this morning.

And in the great kindness of it all, we don't necessarily, well, we do have calendar events, so to say, Advent and Lent. But perhaps the greatest or one of the greatest significant acts we're about to partake in, it's commemoration of an act done for us, for our deliverance, for our protection, and for our preservation.

[31 : 58] And so as we come to your table this morning, would you forge in us understanding of your word? And would you forge in us courage to live out your word?

We ask these things for Jesus sake. Amen.