

Nehemiah 8 “The Voice of Restoration”

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- [0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- ! God is made up not of you once you're bigger or older or smarter, but is made up of you just like you are right now.
- Already, you're a big part of what He's doing in the world. So, we love you and we're thankful for that. That same thing is true in our story that we're going to talk about this morning, where God's people get together to read the Bible for six hours straight.
- Is that a long time? How long do you think Pastor Will usually preaches? Anybody? Anybody want to guess? Eight hours is wrong. It's wrong.
- Hope, how long do you think? Thirty minutes? That's a great guess. I like to think so. An hour. Sometimes it feels like that.
- [1 : 2 5] Sometimes even two hours. It's usually 30 or 35 minutes, okay? Don't complain. But that means that when they get together to read the Bible for six hours, that is like ten straight sermons.
- Can you believe that? All at one time. And guess who's there? Is it just the old people? It's men and it's women and it's all the children too who are there for that whole thing.
- And we've been reading lots of stories, haven't we? Stories from the Bible about Adam and Eve and Noah and Abraham and Ruth and David and Esther.
- And y'all have heard a lot of those stories. We've talked about them. They're about lots of different people. But all of those stories are about God, aren't they? And about how he rescues us because of how much he loves us.
- How he ultimately rescues us through Jesus. So I tell you a lot that the most important part of the sermon is when we read the Bible, isn't it?
- [2 : 2 9] When we open God's Word and let him speak to us. And that's really important in your own lives too. To be reading the Bible for yourself so you hear from God.
- But this morning, before you go back to your seats, I want us to start our sermon reading from God's Word while you're sitting up here. Okay? This is going to be from the book of Nehemiah at chapter 8.
- And we're going to start at verse 1. Okay? I'm just going to read three verses for us. This is God's Word. So listen really closely. Okay? 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.
- That's all the kids. 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.

- [3 : 35] And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. Let's pray together. God, we are here.
- Your people gathered around your Word. Lord, so our prayer is that you would speak, Lord. Speak for your servants are listening.
- Your servants, young and old, we need to hear from you. And so we've opened your Word. And we ask you to speak and help us to listen.
- In Jesus' name, amen. All right, as y'all go back to your seats, let's keep listening to understand God's Word. And some of you are going to kids' worship with Miss Anna right back there.
- Do you see her? If you're going to kids' worship, go right back there. I think that's Miss Julia too. There you go. There they were for six hours.
- [4 : 50] And that was just the first day. Hearing God speak to them. Now there are a lot of voices clamoring around us all the time, aren't there?
- What voices most shape you? What do you remember? I remember hearing, fat boy. I can still hear it as a kid.
- Maybe you've heard, you're just a lazy good-for-nothing. Is it from people around you? Maybe parents or friends or kids?
- Influencers? Influencers? Advertisers? Who want to shape not only who you are, but what you need to have life they'd like to tell you?
- I think for many of us, it's voices in our own head that argue with each other. The self-talk that often condemns.
- [6 : 01] At best, it challenges us to get it together and be who you want to be. You may hear, you're not enough until...
- Or you wake up anxious in the middle of the night. What voices do you hear then? Telling you who you are. Telling you what you have to do. And you can't stop the chatter or the fear.
- What if? What if? The voices say. Or is it possible? Could it be for you and for me that you could hear God speak to you?
- And define you and shape you and your life into what He wants for you? The one who made you. Is that possible? This is the last story this morning in our journey through the Old Testament.
- Where we have seen God rescuing and restoring His people. I'm so excited to share with you what God's been showing me in Nehemiah this week. But first we're going to look back.
- [7 : 12] As they stood there and heard God's word 2,500 years ago or so. They would have heard some of these very stories we've looked at in the last few months.
- They were reading from the first five books of the Bible. Where we started this whole journey by realizing that God spoke blessing.
- Do you remember that? All the way back in Genesis 1. It is so powerful when God speaks. Right? He made us in His image for relationship with Him.
- He formed us as He spoke. And then with the very lips that had just spoken the entire universe into existence. He looked at us and spoke blessing to us.
- To the man and to the woman in His image. Blessing. God's people learned their reason for existence. Right? Relationship with God.
- [8 : 12] In God's place. Which they were to fill everywhere with God's image. Don't forget that. God with God's people. In God's place.

Reflecting God's image. Okay? We're going to hear that this morning. All of that because that's what God said. He spoke us into being.

And He spoke blessing into our relationship with Him. Unbelievably powerful when He speaks. But then of course, we spoiled really quickly that perfect relationship and that perfect place.

We were kicked out away from God. That close relationship where we walked and talked with God. Lost. And so what we've tracked with for story after famous story is God's insistence on rescuing and restoring that spoiled relationship.

He won't let it go, will He? The people in Jerusalem may have heard then of the flood and God's rescue even in the midst of judgment.

[9 : 24] Of Abraham and Isaac and rescue through a substitute sacrifice to bring us to God's promised place. Of Joseph and God's rescue even in the pit that seemed like it was taking us away from that place.

Of Moses and the Red Sea as God delivers His people out of Egypt and brings them toward that promised place. Then of sacrifices and feasts that would always remind them of this God who was working to restore their relationship with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

That's what He's done. And they're hearing of this God. Certainly many of them gathered there had heard more. Of Joshua and the entrance into God's place.

Of Gideon and God's rescue through weakness. Of Ruth and God's faithful restoration even when it looked like demolition. Of David and God's strength and the promise of a permanent king.

Of Elijah and the one true God that they had forgotten. Of Jonah and that true God's commitment to merciful rescue of even very hard-hearted people.

[10 : 34] But then something happened in the story. God's people started getting taken out of God's place.

Because they kept insisting no matter how much He pursued. They kept running further away. They kept insisting on not living in relationship with Him. On not finding Him to be enough.

And so Daniel and his friends then see God protect them. Even in exile in Babylon. Esther is placed in the king's court in Persia to preserve God's people.

And now we get to the end of the Old Testament. We're just over 400 years now before Jesus is born. And God is restoring His rescued people. Finally they're coming back.

A remnant coming to His place. The promised land. And particularly God's city Jerusalem. Enter Nehemiah.

[11 : 34] That was by way of background. And what they were hearing that day. Now here's Nehemiah. Who you probably associate with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

That's true. This is the beginnings of restoration. It's a huge deal right? Because this is God's place. And God's city lies in ruins.

How will they come back there? How can God meet with His people there in safety when they have no walls? And the first few chapters of Nehemiah detail a major construction project.

That's undertaken in prayer. Against opposition. With everyone's help. It's an amazing story of God's people banding together.

Young and old. Each as we saw last week with Esther. Working on his part of the wall. Where God had placed him. And trusting that against all odds.

[12 : 31] God was going to create a place once again. Where He could be with His people. To bear His image. To be that light on a hill. On Mount Zion. There in Jerusalem. Where the nations would see.

And sure enough. That wall is rebuilt so fast. That everyone knows it was no merely human effort. Nehemiah 6.

So the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month. Elul. In 52 days. The entire wall of the city. And when all our enemies heard of it. All the nations around us.

Were afraid. And fell greatly in their own esteem. For they perceived that this work had been accomplished. With the help of our God. An amazing feat.

For sure. If you think of the size of Jerusalem. But you and I know that God is not just focused. On an impressive looking place. Right? That's not been the whole point.

[13 : 27] He wants His people there. To live with Him. And that's where the rest of Nehemiah focuses. Nehemiah starts moving people back into the city.

See God's heart for restoration. Is not merely impressive walls. And sparkling temples. It's rescued people. It's rescued people. And true relationship with Him. Right? That doesn't happen merely by standing in Jerusalem.

When we live in relationship with God. We do so at His word. He speaks. Right?

And we are shaped. And that's exactly what's going on in Nehemiah 8. That we just started reading. This is perhaps pictured out 50,000 or so.

Of God's people. Brought back into the front of the city here. Gathered to find their life from Him. To place themselves under God's word.

[14 : 31] That's their demand. Isn't it? It's their idea. They're the ones who say. Bring the book out Ezra. If Nehemiah is the mayor of Jerusalem. Ezra is the preacher.

He opens God's law. Genesis to Deuteronomy. For six hours. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform.

That they had made for the purpose. 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.

You see how even the physical place it's been set up. They wanted to come under God's word. Open that book for us Ezra. We're going to stand down here. And we're going to listen. Because relationship with God for His people.

Begins with God speaking. Right? He defines the relationship doesn't He? Not us. But they respond. They respond in worship.

[15 : 26] It says amen. Amen. Because they didn't merely hear. They understood. The Levites went around explaining what it meant.

Perhaps translating for those who lived all their lives far away. Helping with historical context. What does it mean for us now? We've never lived here in God's city.

What does it mean as we gather back as God's people? How else were they going to know how to live in God's place in relationship with their covenant God? Unless He tells them.

A people of the book. Right? Relationship involves not just them talking to God. Telling Him what they need. They got a long list. But His speaking to them.

They were desperate for that. They no longer walked and talked with God in the garden. Right? They hadn't heard an audible voice from a burning bush. This group that's gathered.

[16 : 25] They didn't talk with God in the Holy of Holies. But they must hear from Him. We've got to know. What does He say?

So day after day, they gather for this. For hours on end. They insist on being shaped by His Word. And lest you think, yeah, well it was kind of contemporary for them.

They're standing there. This book they pull out. They're reading words a thousand years old. That are, they're convinced, the most relevant. The most preeminent things for their lives.

The most important things they could hear to shape their lives. Can you imagine that? God's people. Shaped by God's Word. That got a star on your outline.

Okay? That means something. It's the foundation for the rest of these things that happen in the relationship. God speaking to His people.

[17 : 27] He's setting the foundation of the relationship. That they may know Him. That they may know how to reflect His image in His world. He's going to tell them. But we will notice several things that result.

As God's people place themselves intentionally under His Word. The first is that they're moved to confession. Now before you protest, if you've read further, yes, confession is quickly trumped by rejoicing.

They're told not to confess too fast. In relationship with this God, it's never mere confession. This groveling sadness. That's not what it looks like to relate to God.

Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites. They help them understand that this is not a day just to mourn and weep. However, when they hear of what God has called His beloved people to.

And how they've been living their life largely ignoring Him. They can't help but confess. Read chapter 9 sometime.

[18 : 36] It's a recounting of their history as a people. It's like what we've walked through in the last few months. And it shows what we've seen over and over. It shows their failure and God's forgiveness.

And their failure and God's forgiveness. Let me just give you a couple examples. Even when you brought them out of Egypt, God. They and our fathers acted presumptuously.

And stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey. And were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them. But they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.

But you are a God ready to forgive. Gracious and merciful. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And you did not forsake them. Even down to verse 30.

Years later now in the promised land. Many years you bore with them. And you warned them by your spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

[19 : 40] That's the exile we've been talking about the last couple weeks. Nevertheless, even when you took them away from your land. In your great mercies you did not make an end of them.

Or forsake them. For you are a gracious and merciful God. Do you see what they're repeating as they confess? What do they have to run to? It's who God is.

How he relates to people who fail over and over. Listen to Pastor John Piper. The reason they are focusing on Israel's failures in the past.

Is that nothing is more important than to learn from this story. What God is like in response to such failures. What can we expect him to do in response to us?

So even when confession is appropriate. They're being shaped by God's word to realize. This always means being full of rejoicing. Because of who he is. Because of how he loves.

[20 : 39] Verse 10. Do not be grieved. For the joy of the Lord is your strength. Verse 12. All the people went their way to eat and drink.

And send portions. And to make great rejoicing. Why? Why did they rejoice? They understood, it says, what God was saying to them.

The longer that they keep up this rejoicing. The more you'll notice the descriptions increase. From rejoicing to great rejoicing. To very great rejoicing. To the point that at the end of chapter 12.

We read, and they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced. For God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. In case you haven't noticed, they were rejoicing. And what happened?

The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. Don't you love that? They're just praising their God.

[21 : 40] They're rejoicing in what he's done. And the nations around them. Who have previously heard of the work being done on the walls. And they've become fearful about Israel and their God.

Now they can hear the people rejoicing in their God. See, their relationship with God has always been intended to fill the earth with his glory. And now by their deeds.

You may not have noticed it. But they've been told to remember those who don't have enough to celebrate. Share your food. And by their words.

Declaring far and wide the greatness of God. Share good news. They give glory to his name according to his word.

Two more related things that happen when God's people listen to his word. They stop for a drink. And they start to obey him.

[22 : 44] They realize that there are ways that God has called them to live in relationship. That they've just been neglecting. We haven't been doing this.

And so they're standing there listening. And the word is read. And with no hesitation. Verse 16 says. So. They did what it said. The people went out. And they brought them.

And they made booths for themselves. They're obeying what God has said. I don't know what else was on their schedules. For the rest of the week. But what's really clear.

Is that nothing was keeping them from God's agenda. When they learned it. They did it. In this case. Their obedience is especially demonstrated.

In their feasting. Oh right. Don't have to tell me twice. Right. This is not hard obedience. Right. Thanksgiving is coming. Get excited. Verse 10.

[23 : 40] Go your way. Eat the fat. Drink sweet wine. Send portions to anyone who has nothing ready. For this day is holy to our Lord. Feast.

And then they celebrate the feast of booths. For seven days. To remember their deliverance from Egypt. God's care for them through the wilderness. All the way into the promised land.

With very great rejoicing. Do you see. You starting to see why God helped them build this wall. It wasn't just for the wall's sake.

Right. So they could gather back in his place. To hear his voice. To remember his rescue. And to start bearing his image in the world again. It's a pretty great picture.

And it would be really nice to wrap this whole series up with a bow. This just fully and finally wrapped up God's work of restoration. All of his people coming back to himself.

[24 : 42] Except that would be a lie. And we would miss the glory of what's still coming. I want us to see that before we finish. See if you read the end of Nehemiah.

The last historical record in the Old Testament. It makes painfully clear. That despite the hopefulness of some of God's people returning. To rebuild God's city.

There is still a great need. For restoration. We already know that the new temple doesn't shine like the old one. There's still no Davidic king.

Like God has promised on the throne to lead the people. They hear God's word through the voices of very imperfect leaders. Like Ezra and Nehemiah.

And the priests. Perhaps partly as a result of that. Their obedience is woefully. Inconsistent. There are some great responses.

[25 : 43] Yes. Where they immediately obey. But there are just as many where you think this would be easy. And there's plenty of parts of God's word. They just ignore them. In no time. And so Nehemiah.

At the end. He continues to call out for the true king. The true city. The true feast. When's it going to happen? I think we can still relate.

With them. The great need for restoration. Not just then in Nehemiah's day. But today. At our stage. In the story.

We do now know the identity of the true king. We rejoice greatly in his victory for us. But we still await his return. Don't we? In our full restoration.

We're part of this pattern where we long for God to restore full purity to his church. That still today has inconsistent obedience. And imperfect leaders.

[26 : 38] And distracted idolatry. Where other things seem more important. But in the meantime. We live in relationship with him.

Shaped by his word. Don't we? Well at least we try. We long for our lives individually.

Our lives together. To be lived under God's word. And I don't say that theologically. Or theoretically alone.

But really. Really practically. And let me take just a minute to tell you how beautifully necessary and helpful. I've seen that be.

Even in the last few weeks. There's been a lot of hurting. Around here lately. I could hardly find someone after the service last week.

[27 : 36] That had had a good day. Or a good week. I've been in more situations than I can count in the last few weeks. Where I've. I've looked at one or more of you and said.

There are no words. There really are no words. I've sat with some of you and just. Read. Sections of God's word with you.

Because there was. There was nothing else. Through tears. Just said. Let's just read together. What does he say? And you know this. If you've been there in a.

In a hospice room. Or at a graveside. Or in a. Living room. With loved ones missing.

In a doctor's office. When you've. When you've heard news that. You didn't see coming. It makes your knees go weak. Or in a. In a boss's office. And you find out that. That you're losing your job.

[28 : 37] And your head is just spinning. And. You don't know where you're even going to live next month. Or what life's going to look like. You. You can't even imagine how to go on. How. How do I take the next step?

And there are no words. There are no words. I could say. Except. The life giving.

Sustaining. Hope filling. Words. Of God. If you've been there. You know it. It's. It's a beautiful thing.

When of all the voices. That you could hear. Saying all sorts of things to you. It's his voice. That. That he speaks. And. And he tells you what it's like.

To walk with him. And to live. Under. His. Word. That is a. Big part. Of. Of why we urge you. To read the Bible.

[29 : 34] Daily. To do that through the year. Even when you don't think it's. Your worst day. Or you're not struggling. To hear him. And that's also what's going on.

When we gather. As God's people. I hope you know this. I just want to. Explain it a little bit more. When we gather for worship. We're gathering to enjoy. Relationship with God.

Together. Right. It's covenant. Conversation. With God. And that means. Not just us talking. That means. We listen to him speak. Notice this in your bulletin. If you have a bulletin.

There's this wonderful. Left hand column. All the way through the service. That most of you don't notice anymore. If you've been here for a while. But what happens. When we come to worship. You'll notice. We do some speaking.

But so does. So does God. He speaks first. To call us. To worship. We read his word. Bill read.

[30 : 29] From his word. This morning. So that we hear from him. About our relationship. We preach his word. To explain it. Right. So that we understand it. We know. We know him.

And how to. How to live in light of his word. And so. Friends. One reason. That you need to be here. On Sunday morning. And that's not the only time. You hear from God. But one reason.

You need to be here. Is because we are gathering. Around God's word. To have our lives. Shaped. And when we don't. All the other voices.

Are the ones doing all the shaping. And you know what that feels like. When that's all you're hearing. The voices in our heads. The voices around us. They're the only ones shaping.

Our hearts. And our lives. So we gather around God's word. To have our lives shaped. Our confessions offered.

[31 : 24] After we hear God's word read. But always trumping our confession. To have our pardon assured. Every time. With great rejoicing. Right.

What could be more exciting. Than the darkest things you've confessed. Being washed away. By the blood of Jesus. And then our obedience is directed. Often our feast.

Celebrated. So that our rejoicing. Is heard far away. Even by those who don't yet know King Jesus. That's why we gather. That's why we gather. But.

As wonderful as that is. As much as I love gathering with you. We don't always long to be here. Don't raise your hand. We don't long to sit under God's word.

No matter how long it lasts. Give me 30 more minutes. I'll prove it to you. I'm not going to try. And even when we do.

[32 : 24] Long to gather. And we come under God's word. My voice cracks sometimes. And it confuses people.

Other times. It's not perfectly God's voice. Our obedience is still imperfect.

So our confession. Constantly continues. And our feast is. It's great. But it's sample sized. If you will. And so that points us.

As the end of Nehemiah does. And as all these stories do. To the completion of restoration. By the God who insists. On restoring us.

To relationship with himself. To that day. When God is with his people. In his place. To reflect his image. To that day. When there is a full size feast.

[33 : 23] Listen. Isaiah tells us about it. On this mountain. Think of it there. In Jerusalem. The Lord of hosts. Will make for all peoples. A feast of rich food. A feast of well aged wine.

Of rich food full of marrow. Of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up. On this mountain. The covering cast over all peoples. The veil spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death. Forever. And the Lord God will wipe away. Tears from all faces. And the reproach of his people. He will take away. From all the earth.

For the Lord has spoken. A feast he says. That's what he speaks. Into existence. Where all peoples. Those from every nation.

Tribe. People. And language. Gather. Because they've heard. Of our rejoicing. And entered into relationship. With our God. By washing their robes. And the blood of the Lamb.

[34 : 16] Who came. And once and for all. He accomplished. What all of those other sacrifices. Were seeking to accomplish. He actually brought us back. To relationship.

With God. Where we now obey him. Gladly. And feast. On his goodness. It's this feast. The wedding supper.

Of the Lamb. That will be held. In a new city. The new Jerusalem. Revelation tells us. Has gloriously secure walls.

Keeping us safe. From all harm. From any sorrow. Why? How does that happen? Because this city. Has firm foundations. Its builder.

And maker. Is God. Himself. In fact. We're not just going to be. In God's place.

[35 : 10] In the new Jerusalem. But we as God's people. Are the new Jerusalem. He is building. Right now. Even as we speak.

Right here. The bride of Christ. Perfected. In his image. To live. In obedient. And intimate. Relationship. With him. Forever. In God's place.

The place he made. The place where you never have to worry. About which voice to listen to. There's no more competition.

There's no more static. In your head. You don't have to fear the voice. Of condemnation. From yourself. Or from someone else.

Being the thing that defines you. You don't even have to settle. For reading his word. You will hear.

[36 : 08] His. Voice. Do you know what he'll say? Can you guess what he will speak. To you? Blessing.

He will give you. Himself. Revelation 21. Just listen. I saw the holy city. New Jerusalem. Coming down out of heaven from God. Prepared as a bride.

Adorned for her husband. That's all of you. Connected to Jesus. By faith. And what does he say? A loud voice from the throne. Saying. Behold. The dwelling place of God.

Is with man. He will dwell with them. And they will be his people. And God himself. Will be with them. As their God. This will sound familiar. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning. Nor crying. Nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. He who's seated on the throne said. Behold. I am making all things new.

[37 : 06] Do you hear what he's describing? It's God. With his people. In his place. Reflecting his image. Because the one on the throne says. He's making all things new.

And that includes you and me. That one on the throne later says. Let me define our relationship. He says. I will be his God. And he will be my son.

The heir. To my image. My family. My place. My home. My presence. My love.

Because I say so. Says the Lord. As we pray.

Together now. I just want you to. Listen to God's voice. For a couple minutes. It's the one we need to hear. Thus says the Lord.

[38 : 08] Fear not. For I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters. I will be with you.

And through the rivers. They shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire. You shall not be burned. And the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God.

The Holy One of Israel. Your Savior. Because you are precious in my eyes. And honored. And I love you. I give men in return for you.

Peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not. For I am with you. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life.

For the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own. And my own know me. Just as the Father knows me. And I know the Father. And I lay down my life.

[39 : 06] For the sheep. And I have other sheep. That are not of this fold. I must bring them also. And they will listen. To my voice. In a time of favor.

I have answered you. In a day of salvation. I have helped you. I will keep you. And give you as a covenant. To the people. To establish the land. They shall not hunger. Or thirst.

Neither scorching wind. Nor sun. Shall strike them. For he who has pity on them. Will lead them. And by springs of water. Will guide them. I will not forget you.

Behold I have engraved you. On the palms of my hands. Your walls are continually. Before me. Behold the dwelling place of God.

Is with man. He will dwell with them. And they will be his people. And God himself. Will be with them. As their God. He will wipe away. Every tear from their eyes.

[40 : 04] And death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning. Nor crying. Nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. Behold I am making all things new.

I am the Alpha. And the Omega. The beginning and the end. To the thirsty. I will give from the spring. Of the water of life. Without payment. The one who conquers.

Will have this heritage. And I will be his God. He will be my son. Father. Father today.

As we hear your voice. May we not harden. Our hearts. May we know no other voice. May we not.

Push yours away. In order to believe. Something that someone else says. May your voice even. Break our stony hearts. Would we run back to you.

[41 : 06] Would we delight. In life with you. Now and forever. We ask in Jesus name. Amen.

For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.