

Why Preach?

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Nehemiah chapter 8, I'm going to read 12 verses here. Nehemiah 8, 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.

[1 : 19] And beside him stood Mattathiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Mahasaiah on the right hand, and Padaiah, Mishael, Milkiah, Hashum, Hashbanah, Zechariah, and Meshulam on the left hand.

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, Jeshua, Bani, Serabiah, Jamin, Aqab, Sabathai, Hodiah, Masaiah, Kalita, Azariah, Josabeth, Hanan, Paliah, and the Levites helped the people understand the law while the people remained in their places.

They read from the book, 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 all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready.

[2 : 56] For this day is holy to the Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites calmed 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, to send portions and make great rejoicing, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen. Please be seated. In 2007, the Washington Post planned a now famous experiment.

They arranged for world-renowned violinist Joshua Bell to perform in a D.C. subway in the midst of rush hour. On that morning, leaning against a subway wall, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals cap, Bell opened his violin case to collect change.

And he began to play. Playing a \$3.5 million Stradivarius violin, Bell performed six classical pieces, while 1,097 people passed by.

[4 : 14] No one knew who it was. No one knew that, and I quote, the fiddler standing against a bare wall outside the metro was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made.

It was, the article says, an experiment in context, perception, and priorities. How did the passersby respond?

You know, we've seen videos like this. How did they respond? The first glance Bell received was a man who, turning to hear the music, rushed on past. Seven people stopped for a minute or so.

One guy stopped for six minutes. Give it up to this nameless guy. Another noticed the excellence of Bell's playing, looking bewildered at all the people passing him by.

All told, 27 people gave money for a sum total of \$32.17. And 1,070 people rushed by completely oblivious.

[5 : 32] One lady recognized that it was Bell. She was astonished, confused, at why Joshua Bell, who played the night before somewhere in D.C., was playing for change.

It's a fascinating experiment in perception priorities that's been imitated many times now. Well, driven by rush hour, the vast majority of people passed by.

They failed to perceive the brilliant music being performed. But a failure to perceive things of significance and influence is not limited to rush hour subway.

It's relevant to us as well. It's relevant to our daily lives. The most significant and the most important things, as Stephen Covey has taught us, are not often the urgent things.

They're not the things crying for us to get them done. It's relevant to our daily lives to not to perceive things rightly. It's relevant for our weekly gatherings.

[6 : 38] There are many priorities that we do when we gather. We talked about that this morning. We call it worship. We gather to sing. We gather to pray. We gather to hear testimonies of God's faithfulness.

We gather to observe the sacrament. We do gather to do announcements, which I hate. That's my least favorite part of the meeting, because it seems to interrupt the worship of God.

But we also gather to hear the word preached. One priority stands above them all when we gather, and that's the preached word. I would imagine sermons here are among the longest you've ever heard.

I was raised in Presbyterian Church 15 to 18 minutes, and I still found time to sleep. Ours are 40 to 45, unless Taylor's preaching.

But before beginning our next sermon series, Lord willing, on the book of 1 Corinthians, I wanted to pause and ask. We wanted to pause and ask, why devote so much time to the preached word?

[7 : 48] Is it really necessary? Shouldn't we trim it down to a few points that would be helpful? Maybe get us out before the rush hour of lunch. Is it essential?

And if it is necessary, and if it is essential, is it still vital to us? Jonathan Edwards once said, in the Second Great Awakening, people would have stepped over gold to hear the word preached.

I wonder, do we approach the preached word with the same eagerness, the same earnestness? In a word, where we're going is, let the church hear.

The preaching of God's word is the preeminent priority of our gatherings for the building up of all. Let the church hear. The preaching of God's word is the preeminent priority of our gatherings for the building up of all.

You know, I think in many ways this flows from last week where we talked about the created word, the written word. This morning, focused on the preached word. So we're going to unpack this text a little bit differently.

[8 : 56] I'm not going to go into every nook and cranny of this text, but hopefully using it to say some things that I trust are biblical. I think the priority of preaching, the priority of the word of God and the gathering of God's people is beautifully and profoundly illustrated in this text.

So three points, three words basically, the word. The word. The preeminent priority of preaching derives from what is being preached, the word.

The word is to occupy a central role in our gathering, most especially through preaching. This is evident in the passage. If you're not familiar with the passage, this is Nehemiah.

Ezra and Nehemiah is a wonderful section of scripture. It's about the people returning from exile. So the year's probably 440 B.C. or something like that. After the fall of the southern kingdom in 586, some of these exiles begin returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and rebuild the temple.

Can you imagine what they're thinking? They thought, you know, the promised land was the bee's knees. You know, it was everything. They're in the place with the temple and God's people in that place and in that temple and then they're thrown off the promised land.

[10 : 15] And so, after years of weeping, they're returning to Jerusalem to rebuild. They must be thinking, will God dwell with us again? there's no little opposition that they face.

They build with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other to rebuild the temple in the face of opposition. And then they assemble.

So we are really landing into the high point of Nehemiah. They assemble for the first time in Jerusalem to hear the word of the Lord. I love, look at verse 1.

They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law. Ezra, go get the book of the law. Now we're ready to hear the book of the law. This is no casual moment, a wonderful moment.

They've been preparing for to hear the word. Look at verse 3. And he read from it, Ezra did, from morning until midday. Six hours, something like that.

[11 : 14] Possibly the whole Pentateuch. First five books of the Bible, he read in the hearing of the people. Not only was this a long reading of the law, you know, we've got to be careful with our scripture readings.

This was a long reading of the law. It was a long scroll. Look at verse 4. It names all these people that stand beside Nehemiah.

I think many assume these people were helping to hold the scroll. You know, the book of the law didn't come with a binding and table of contents and chapter divisions.

It was a scroll. These people were helping to hold the scroll. So a long reading, a long scroll. Look at verse 5. Ezra opens a book in the sight of all.

He's above them. He's standing up on some sort of platform not to elevate him but to elevate what was happening. The law was being read to the people again.

[12 : 14] And then in verse 8, there's men there helping to state the book of the law clearly.

And I want this image, I want to keep this image before us. The people face so much opposition in rebuilding the walls and they rebuilt them and the first thing they do is they gather around the book of the law.

The foundation block to the preeminent priority of preaching in our gathering is the word of God that binds our life together and indeed upholds us.

The word of God, as we know, reveals who God is. Without the word, we do not know who God is. That's the creation story. It illustrates it so very well. God was and that was it.

And then with the word, he said, let there be light and there was light and then he made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them revealing who he is. All that he made was made with the word.

[13 : 18] So Romans 1 says, all can see the invisible attributes of God. You don't know what God's like. Climb up on Charlie's bunion in the middle of the Smokies.

You can see his eternal power, his divine attributes and the things that are made. The scripture says all people are without excuse because of what he's revealed.

It's so clear. And we see from creation that God is eternal, independent, self-sufficient. He's all powerful. The God who created the Milky Way galaxy and the hummingbird which flaps its wings 50 times a second surely is not limited.

by anything else. But as Kirby laid out for us last week, we need more to know who God is to follow him.

God, the word reveals God's character and plan. I love the story of scripture. This time of year I'm back in Genesis and I just love it in these Bible reading plans after God, after mankind falls into sin as Gil reminded us this morning, God does not wipe them out.

[14 : 28] God makes a promise immediately to rescue this people. He's a God of grace. Sometime later he called Abraham out of Ur the Chaldeans worshipping the moon God with a word promises to make, he makes a covenant with him.

He walks through the animals. He's the God of the covenant. That's not a word that brings warm and fuzzies but it should. It should. It means God's more committed to you than you could ever be to him.

That's what the covenant means when it looks as though the promise is dead and the people are enslaved in Egypt making bricks without straw God calls Moses and says let my people go bring them out of there.

Why? Because he's a God who keeps covenant and promises. He calls Moses up on the mountain and he gives him the book of the law. Why? Because he's a God of holiness and the story of the Bible just meanders along telling us more and more about this God how he's a God of steadfast love.

He doesn't bring down judgment doesn't cast us off. He's a God of faithfulness. He brings people back from the exile. When we are faithful he remains faithful and all of this comes to fulfillment and to fruition.

[15 : 41] It crystallizes in Jesus Christ revealing that God is a God who saves. For as the apostle John tells us God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world which he could have.

without doing anything unjust. He sent his son into the world in order that the world might be saved through him.

It's critical for us to pause and remember what would we know about God or really about anything without the word.

this precious gift. Think about all those men holding up the scroll and I have this right here.

Dozens of them. John Murray one of my favorites I was going to call him a fave but I don't think he'd appreciate that.

[16 : 48] Scottish theologian said apart from the scriptures and the knowledge derived from them we today would be in complete darkness respecting the content of our Christian faith.

We must not deceive ourselves as to the darkness and confusion that would be ours if there were no Bible. We depend upon the message of scripture for every tenet of our faith.

Every ray of redemptive light that illumines our mind and for every ray of hope against the issues of time and eternity.

The scriptures not like optional extra for the Christian life they're they're vital. All that we can know about God must be revealed.

It's what's meant to put our lives together and keep us sane. And so it would be very appropriate for the people to gather together to read the Bible to meditate to memorize to discuss and apply.

[18 : 01] But one more thing we must understand when it comes to reading our Bible is that we're not meant to merely learn facts learn information learn data and dates learn stories the Bible still the Bible still speaks.

Now I'm not saying that the word speaks kind of like old letters speak. Last month actually I found this letter written to my mother about family history and in many ways it spoke to me.

It was telling stories about my grandparents and my great grandparents. I'd never read it and never heard these stories but that's not what I mean when I say the Bible still speaks.

What I mean is that God still speaks in the present through what he has spoken in the past. God reveals himself speaking authoritatively in the present through what he's spoken in the past.

Hebrews 4 says it like this the word of God is living and active sharper than any two-edged sword piercing the division of soul and spirit joints and marrow and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

[19 : 11] The word of God is living and active. It searches out all men and women. I love the way Hebrews says it in Hebrews 3 7. He's about to quote Psalm 95 which incidentally is the psalm that called us to worship and he says therefore as the Holy Spirit says present tense I find this so provoking he says as the Holy Spirit says and then he quotes Psalm 95 he's saying what the Holy Spirit said back then is the same thing he still says and if you know Psalm 95 there's four different things here as the Lord said in the wilderness when the people were wandering through the wilderness today don't harden your heart then he said it in the psalm so it was in the book of the Psalter of the old covenant people of God and so they sang this the Holy Spirit was saying so too it said to the author of the Hebrews because Hebrews was written to a certain people in a certain time and now it says to you and me what's all that mean it means that the Bible is a living word to living people from the living

God it's living and active and this is why the word of God and the preached word especially occupy the preeminent place in our gathering because God still speaks and when he speaks he acts God works to revive dead hearts open blind eyes create new life bring about a living faith save sanctify and secure through the word and so the preeminent priority on preaching begins with the word that is in the center secondly the preaching the preaching so the word and the preaching the preeminent priority of preaching derives from what is being preached the word and the commandment to listen to the word preached we see this modeled in this text

Ezra read from the book of the law pointed that out in verse 3 he stood on this wooden platform to be seen by all Ezra blessed the Lord it appears Ezra was like a priest leading the people praying for the people the man of God in the hour God needed but look down in verse 7 and 8 I think this captures preaching I won't say all these names again but all these guys look in verse 7 second half they helped the people to understand while the people remained in their places they read from the book from the law of God clearly and they gave the sense so the people understood the reading many would argue that Ezra was reading the book of the law in

Hebrew and while he was reading the people who would have spoke Aramaic these Levites were among the people translating the scripture from Hebrew to Aramaic and giving the sense I just love the way that's worded and so the work of the Levites remains the work of preaching to translate and give a sense of the meaning to the congregation but it's not as though we build our theology of preaching from this one verse all throughout the Bible God's standard way of communicating personally with his human creatures throughout salvation history was through the works and action of human messengers he calls prophets to speak for him we see that first with Moses and then the line of prophets all the way after him all the way up to John the Baptist and what do the prophets do?

They preach he calls the twelve the seventy-two to preach he calls the son the Messiah to preach strikingly after his first day of ministry in Capernaum where he's healing everyone who comes to him Jesus says look look 443 he says I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns for I was sent for that purpose he never says I was sent to heal though he does heal he never says I was sent to perform signs and wonders though he does he never says I was sent to feed the poor though he does he never says I was sent to make the world a better place though he does but he says I was sent to preach so after he ascends to heaven what do the disciples do they preach riches and gold I have none but what I do have I proclaim unto you proclaim the word of salvation

[24 : 28] Peter preaches Stephen preaches Philip preaches Paul preaches but the idea so therefore the idea is that not preaching is not this modern thing that came from rationalism or something like that preaching is the fulfillment of the new covenant as well this idea that we gather not around priests Christ is our priest we need no other priest and mediator between God and man except Jesus Christ Christ is our sacrifice therefore we have no altar up here we have no sacrificial system we have nothing for you to bring and offer we just have this podium it's a little bit nicer than our music stand used to be but it's still just a podium why because Christ is our priest Christ is our sacrifice and it's through him that we worship him and so we proclaim we celebrate all that he has done through preaching because the gospel is indeed not good advice not good counsel it is good news

I do I proclaim that to you Jesus Christ said repent therefore and be baptized every one of you actually Peter said that for the forgiveness of sins and so I proclaim that unto you repent and have relationship with God just as Psalm 95 says in Hebrews 3 quotes today if you will not harden your heart you can receive Jesus Christ he stands ready his arms outstretched the scripture says all day long to a guilty people and he's upheld faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ I'll offer you Jesus Christ so all that said it's no surprise that Paul urges Timothy to preach and when he's telling what pastors should do in local churches thousands of years later he says they should preach 2 Timothy 4 he says

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing in his kingdom preach the word be ready in season and out of season reprove rebuke exhort with complete patience in teaching and so it's been throughout the history of the world the church has been built up and strengthened sustained and sanctified by preaching the church has declined when preaching has declined the church has thrived when preaching has thrived the church should have a high view of preaching not because of a man but because of the word and so the aim of preaching our preaching remains the same as Nehemiah 8 what is it to give a sense of what's going on to explain the word in its original context and apply the word to our present context some call this expositional preaching the idea is just that the meaning of the text is the meaning of the sermon just applied in a different context

I love the way J.I. Packer says it he says to preach the scriptures is no more just as it is no less than to acknowledge them for what they are and let their content be to us what it already is in itself the bible text therefore is the real preacher and the role of the man in the pulpit of the counseling conversation is simply to let the passages say their peace through them and so the bible is the real preacher the preacher's job is not to give you a hot take the preacher's job is not to give you his unvarnished opinion please leave that unvarnished opinion at home the preacher's job is to let the text say what the text wants to say and wonderfully the effect of preaching is that it builds us up to God it brings about an encounter with God I love the way we see this again and again in the book of Acts that preaching doesn't merely it's not just an oral exercise it brings about an encounter with the living God have you ever wondered about 1st

Thessalonians 2 Paul's writing to this church in Thessalonica this is a church that he planted that he preached to and he says we thank God constantly for this when you received the word of God which you heard from us you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is the word of God now think about that Paul's not talking about one of his letters the word of God in a authoritative way Paul's talking about his preaching which were the words of men and yet because they are the passages of scripture declaring the greatness of God and the greatness of his grace they received them as the words of men they heard the words of men but in unpacking the scripture they heard the very words of God what's all this mean well God means for us to grow up to be sanctified and saved through the preaching of God's word week after week

[29 : 48] I read not too long ago about a best-selling Christian author who said Sunday morning church service is not an enormous priority spending time with other believers is some people associate Sunday mornings with God one of the things I associate with God is a sunrise how many sunrises have you missed over the years and God created that now I want to give the guy a benefit of the doubt I don't know all of what he was trying to say but that's very bad theology enjoy your sunrise but don't neglect gathering together Bible never commands you to watch a sunrise but does command you to not neglect the gathering together and to gather under the ministry of pastors who are called to speak the truth in love so that we grow up into Christ rather speaking in love Ephesians 4 we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ from whom the whole body being joined together by every joint with which it is equipped makes the body grow so that builds itself up in love

John Calvin says in a rather provocative way commenting on Ephesians 4 he says we see how God who could in a moment perfect his own nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church we see the way set for it the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon pastors many are led either by pride dislike or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous this is like blotting out the face of God which shines upon us in teaching for neither the light and heat of the sun nor food and drink are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church that's bold talk but I think you can say it standing on

Ephesians 4 God desires for the church to grow up under the preaching of ordinary men to ordinary people for his glory many historically many have said the most important means of grace is not read your Bible and pray every day even though the song says you grow grow grow the most important means of grace is the gathering together with the people of God under the word of God under preaching 1 Peter 1 says the living and abiding word which brought you to life 1 Peter 1 25 says it was the word preached to you after all when we read our Bible and pray every day at home we can read the Bible where we want to read the Bible and neglect to read the Bible where we need to hear the Bible address us we can make a

Bible of our own but under the preaching of the word where we're commanded to preach the whole counsel of God we get a fuller diet point three the people so the word the preaching the people the final way the preeminence of preaching is evident in our text is through the response of the people they listen and respond they listen look at verse 1 they all gather as one man you know this is like what Sunday is like you know but no not a single member is missing no flu A is keeping anybody at home on this day all the people are gathered ten times in these twelve verses ten times it says all the people all the people all the people why because where are the people supposed to be found on Sunday morning with the people of God that's what's going on all are attentive three it says three look in the back half of that last sentence and the ears of all the people the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law they're standing as the book of the law is read their ears are attentive you know we need to be reminded of that you know they answer amen amen they're deeply affected lifting their hands praising

God they worship it says that's proscuneo that means literally bow down with their face to the ground worshiping God all will bow down and worship God they're responding wonderfully and I can commend you as a church about how you listen and are attentive and are earnest in your hearing it is an evidence of grace in your life I believe an evidence of grace you're here on a Sunday morning you can be so many other places you want to hear even preaching this sermon is a little bit of an odd thing because we're talking about what we do and yet it's helpful I remember one time not too long ago I just sighed while preaching a sermon and said geez I just have way too much stuff that I want to say and somebody came up and said don't ever say that don't ever stop until you know you need to stop I said no you won't say that honey you know that might come back to my church you know but

[35 : 33] I just love the heart of it though I think that's the heart of this church nevertheless we must continue to listen we want to model our lives after this listen expectantly if indeed the word of God still speaks and it really doesn't matter who the man of God is in the pulpit as long as the word of God is open and proclaimed so I've been edified through some lousy sermons over the years because the word of God speaks and so we listen expectantly expecting God to speak to us we come to church eager eyes peeled Lord speak to us there's nothing casual about listening there should be a reverent hush as we sit under the word of God except for some kids which we love they remind us we have a future together by God's grace and so there's a reverent hush as we sit under the word we want to hear what God has to say so we listen expectantly we listen humbly as well far too often we walk into church with everything fixed you know some things acceptable some unacceptable we come with our things our beliefs our assumptions what we think is right and yet that's not going to be humble listening if we just keep our grid intact biblical preaching should confront us and insult us if you don't get angry once in a while then you might not be listening to listen humbly is to be willing to admit when the

Bible is right and I am wrong the risen Christ says in those seven letters again and again he who has ears to hear let him hear what the spirit says he's not saying he who has these things on either side of his head he's saying he who is humble who will let scripture rearrange the furniture of their life let him hear what the spirit says John Stott says a deaf church is a dead church it dies long before the people leave and here's reality I can on the one hand commend you with the grace of God in your life but on the other hand I want to warn you not all who begin well end well you're crazy if you're not scared I want to keep hearing let's keep hearing listen humbly listen carefully listening ought not to be it ought to be an activity not a passivity listening that honors

God it's not just take what the preacher says to the bank listening that honors God is active saying where did he get that from is that right is that going on you know in this respect it can be helpful to take notes don't try to transcribe every message after all AI can do that for you now so you just click down on our where you download our messages and you can get a transcript if you want one I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy but note taking can be helpful like the Lord brings something to mind or brings a scripture to mind or says something just a certain way that's helpful you should write down those things have been tremendous to me I go back to notes like that why because I want to learn and J.C.

Riles says never be ashamed of being a learner and so we come in trying to learn we listen carefully finally we listen weekly over the past 30 to 40 years it's become possible to hear sermons outside of church in previous generations there was no recording no live stream no podcast if you wanted to hear Spurgeon preach you had to take a boat you had to go to London yourself to the Metropolitan!

Tabernacle if you wanted to hear Lloyd Jones you had to go to Westminster to hear him in many ways it's good I remember being born again in 2001 and downloading every sermon Dr.

[39 : 44] John Piper preached on Romans I didn't make it through I think all of them I made through a lot and he preached on it for eight years but it's a tremendous gift but we must remember listening is to be the weekly corporate activity of the gathered church preaching is not really preaching when it's not done in the context of the gathered church it's just another informative resource so the church is meant to be assembly of men and women who gather physically together we listen together to be shaped together we listen together to hold one another accountable we listen together to respond together in the ways that are appropriate in prayer and contrition and etc and so let us continue to devote ourselves to the priority of preaching only one person in the subway that busy morning noticed that it was the world-renowned violinist

Joshua Bell may we not fail to hear and to see and to know what God is doing when the church gathers together underneath its word may we be eager to hear and hear with earnestness let the church hear preaching God's words preeminent priority of our gatherings for the building up of all let us pray father in heaven we humble ourselves before you we offer ourselves to you sincerely and completely lord whether through the word open this morning or any word in the scriptures we pray that you would search us see if there's any unclean way in us lord we don't want listening to be a passive activity but instead one in which we continually invite you to mold us and shape us to conform us into the image of

Jesus Christ we pray that you do that work you finish that work build us up we pray in Christ's name amen you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com you