

# The People and The Word

As we continue with our series from the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, today we find ourselves in Nehemiah 8. Here we find a vitally important scene in this part of the history of the People of God.

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

<sup>2</sup> So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. <sup>3</sup> He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. <sup>1</sup>

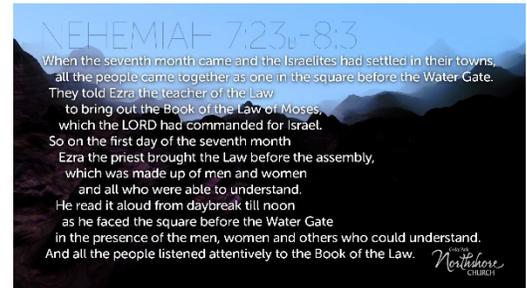
Ezra read God's Word to the People, and they listened attentively.

It started at sunrise and continued until noon (a six-hour sermon) and everyone was there... women, men, and children (all who were able to understand).

This marks a crucial, covenant-renewing step in God's plan for His People as it is revealed in the Book of Nehemiah. It seems like a distinct *fourth* major step demonstrated in the life of Nehemiah and the Book that bears his name.

In the first verses of the Book, we read about Nehemiah's calling to the work. It started with Nehemiah responding to **need**, and then it was confirmed in **prayer**, in God's **provision**, and in the **response** of the people. This isn't the only way that God raises up, or calls, a leader... but it is a pretty common way, and a pattern worth considering and following:

1. **Need:** In Nehemiah's case he heard about the vulnerability of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the People because of the disrepair of the City's walls and gates. He heard about the need, he understood it, and he thought he could do something about it. That is where it all started for Nehemiah.



<sup>1</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 7:73-8:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

2. **Prayer:** He took the burden that was on his *heart* and *mind* to his **knees** in prayer. We have no record of specific instructions from God, no *burning bush* or *handwriting on a wall*. Not even a **prophet** with a *Word from God*. What we see is Nehemiah laying out His plan before the Lord, looking to God for direction, wisdom, and courage.
3. **Provision:** God gave Nehemiah favor with King Artaxerxes, who not only gave *permission*, but supplied *resources* as well.
4. **People:** Perhaps the most obvious sign of *leadership* is **followers**; Nehemiah's leadership was confirmed by those who followed him, sacrificing resources and safety to do the work of securing the City.

Can you see how that works as a rubric for a call to leadership? I've heard some say that "the need constitutes the call." We don't have to *wait around* for God to part the clouds and tell us precisely what to do. When there is work to be done and we can do something about, that is often the start. Then we take it to prayer; we ask the God who guides to also provide, and we await the true confirmation of leadership as others come alongside us.

I might even add a *fifth* indicator: opposition. As Nehemiah went about his work, he met fierce opposition, which in retrospect simply validated that he was on *God's side* and on the right track.

So, from a big picture perspective, *calling a leader* was the first *big step* revealed in the Book of Nehemiah. A recurring theme throughout the entire Bible, Old Testament and New, is that God gives gifts of leaders to His People to accomplish His work.



Next, came the **structure**, building the wall and restoring the gates and doors. If one were just taking a cursory look at the Book of Nehemiah, one might conclude that the main point of the Book is the rebuilding of the **walls**. The walls were certainly important... but not the main point. It wasn't merely about *rebuilding the walls*; it was about *restoring the People of God*.



That is the third step: **people**. Last week we made the point that the work was clearly not finished with the mere building of the wall, that the City wasn't a city until it was filled with people. God's work is not merely about buildings or walls... not even about altars and temples; God's work is about, for, in and through people.



Which brings us to this fourth step: God's **Word**. God used leaders to build the structure. The structure needed to be filled with people. And the people needed to be filled with God's word.



Here again is an outline that can be applied to much of God's work.

From time to time someone asks something along the lines of "what is the point of all of this? What is the *vision* for Northshore? Where are we heading?"

There are lots of ways that I could answer that. I could stick to a Biblical answer and quote the Bible. Perhaps I'd go with the *Great Commission*, where Jesus told His followers to:

go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.<sup>2</sup>

That certainly isn't the only passage of Scripture that describes what we are about as the Church... but it is a pretty good start.

I often like to describe our work here as **upward facing**, **inward strong**, and **outward focused** (perhaps you've heard me say that a time or two). It draws attention to our core purposes of worshipping God in all we do, strengthening believers, and reaching out in service and proclamation of the Gospel.

But this four-point plan in Nehemiah is a pretty good way to describe what we're doing here at Northshore as well.

1. **Leaders:** We strive to be a place that develops and empowers leaders... not as anyone to be venerated or idolized, but to serve.
2. **Structure:** We are glad for the resources we have in our hands to do God's work. We have systems and programs and a building and such. It takes work and sacrifice to pull these things together and keep them going; it is worth it. The structure is really important, both the physical structures and the organizational and programmatic structures. But the structures alone are not the church; the **people** are the church.
3. **People:** With leaders in place, and the structures working... then the people are free to come and grow and fill the work. We are here to serve people... all kinds of people... young, old, rich, poor, from every nation... and we are here to serve *Christian people* AND *non-Christian people* (or perhaps *not-yet-Christian* people). We are inward strong AND outward focused. The Church is unique in that our purpose is **not primarily** for our members.

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<sup>2</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 28:19–20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

4. **God's Word:** Above all else, above programs that provide safety and education for kids, above feeding programs and academic endeavors, above the fun we have and the service we do... above all of it is the Word of God. We believe that what people need most is the relationship *with* God and the understanding *of* God that can only come by understanding the Word of God. We're building a place and programs to be filled with people who will be filled with the Word of God.

We are pretty serious about the Bible here. These 30 minutes or so on Sunday morning should just be *the tip of the iceberg* when it comes to studying and knowing God's Word... but it is an important 30 minutes. So we take a fairly serious, methodical approach to working through God's Word.

I don't merely preach about whatever is on my mind or what we may be seeing in the news. We work to cover as much as possible... not only focusing on one part of the Bible (such as prophecy, or the red letters, or just the New Testament).

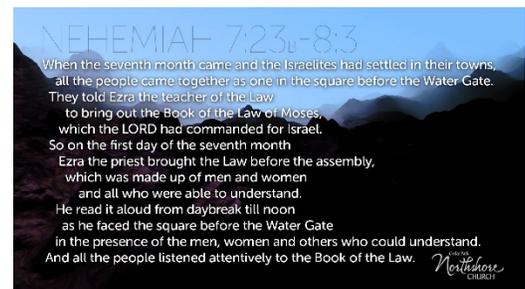
It turns out that there is a fairly vigorous discussion these days between prominent preachers happening in the public space (Twitter, blogs and such) about the role of the Old Testament in our days. Some seem to think we should let the Old be old and focus almost exclusively on the New. I get it. Jesus and the Gospel are in the New Testament, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ will always be the main thing around here... nevertheless, obviously (since we're in a series from the OT) I'm committed to the entire Bible.

Leaders building structures to be filled with people who are filled with God's Word... that is what we are seeing in Nehemiah chapter 8.

Let's take a few minutes and consider some of the details.

the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses<sup>3</sup>

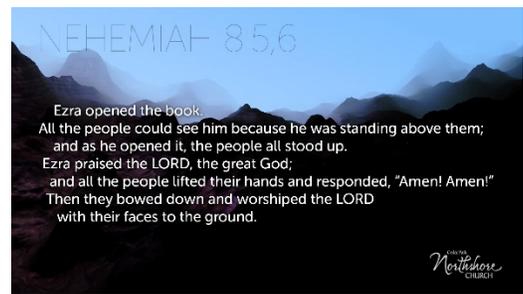
This isn't some sort of spontaneous *storming of the gates* and a *mob* outside demanding that Ezra present the Bible. As we read we'll see that this was a moment that was planned and prepared for; we'll see that a platform was built, and a place was readied. This place before the Water Gate was likely on a hillside with terrain providing for a natural amphitheater.



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<sup>3</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 8:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. <sup>6</sup> Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. <sup>4</sup>

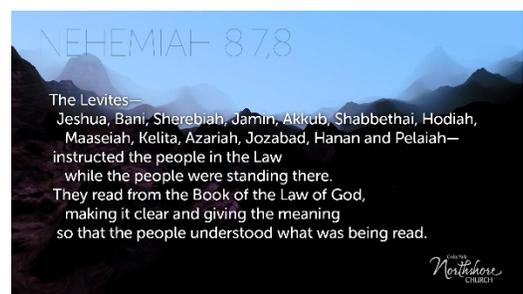


Notice some of the familiar elements here:

- **Praise:** The service started with praise to the Lord. The *countdown clock* wound down to zero and the worship team lead in singing, probably 4 songs, a couple of fast ones followed by a couple of slow ones. Well... maybe not exactly like that, but this is a Biblical pattern, that when we come to the Word of God together it is good to begin with praise and worship and thanksgiving.
- **Verbal Response:** The people were not mere spectators at a concert, they joined in shouting “Amen! Amen!” expressing their agreement with Ezra and the others situated on the platform. They added their voices to the voices of their leaders in praising God.
- **Physical Response:** Not only did they participate with their voices, they lifted their hands, again expressing their agreement and participation in praise, and demonstrating their passion for God as well as their dependence on Him. They also bowed, in reverence to their Holy God.

These acts of praise were not only a matter of giving God what He is due... praise has a profound way of preparing our hearts and minds for encountering God’s Word.

<sup>7</sup> The Levites—*Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah*—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. <sup>8</sup> They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. <sup>5</sup>



Ezra had *associate pastors*. This matter of understanding the Word of God was a matter of the **community** working together... not just Ezra reading and preaching God’s Word, but many in the community working together (likely in small groups) learning together. Verse 7 mentions the Levites, the clergy of the day, but the laity are prominent too.

<sup>4</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 8:5–6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 8:7–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

There's a list in verse 4 that were not likely Levites... and then there was Nehemiah, a layman, who added his voice to the teaching:

<sup>9</sup> Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Not only did the people respond with their voices and actions, shouting Amen, raising their hands, and bowing their heads... they responded with their **emotions**.

The Word of God preached is met and empowered by the Spirit of God and it moves us... it demands the attention of our minds, it motivates the action of our hands and feet, and it grips our hearts and souls.

Hebrews 4 puts it like this:

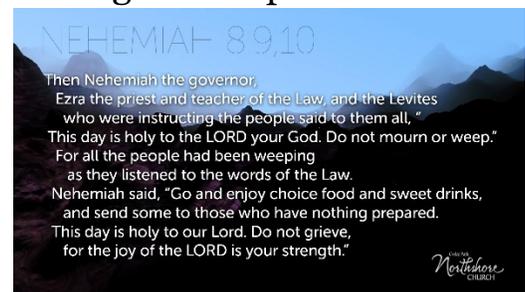
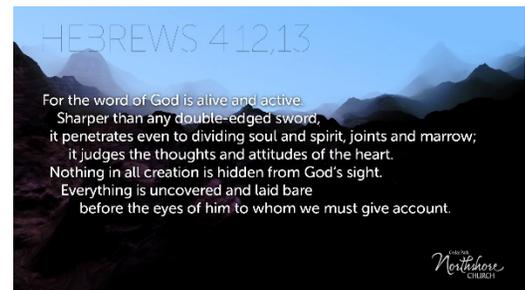
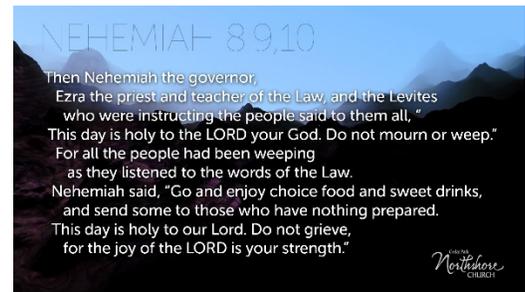
For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. <sup>13</sup> Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. <sup>6</sup>

God's word penetrates soul and spirit. It uncovers us, lays us bare before God... and lays us bare before ourselves. We are undone. It is right to respond with our emotions. Sometimes it may be with tears of gratitude... but here it was with tears of sorrow, mourning, and weeping.

God was restoring the people that day, through the power of His Word. There was weeping; the people realized how far they had wandered... and that their God was bringing them back... not merely to a City but to a covenant relationship with Him.

Yet:

<sup>10</sup> Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." <sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Heb 4:12–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>7</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 8:9–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The *joy of the Lord* is **our** strength too. There **is** time for weeping and mourning... but the joy of the Lord is our **strength**.

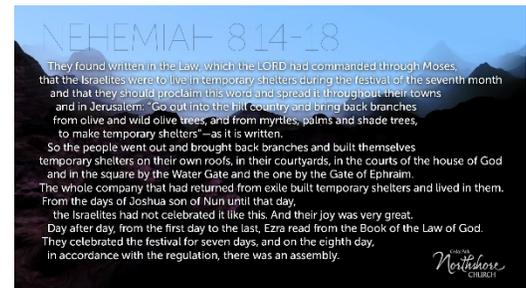
It is an interesting thing, this directive from Nehemiah to celebrate with a **feast**. I think it is a clue that there was something else going on here... the sort of thing that can be summed up in **one** word... a word I'll let this guy on the video exclaim.

Tradition!

I'm convinced that there was a great deal of **tradition** in the mix here. There are clues. The first one we already read. It was the *seventh month* of the Jewish Calendar; it was a **holiday** season... a season of feasts and tradition. Specifically the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles.



The *Feast of Tabernacles* is specifically referenced in the end of chapter 8. One could be reading along and conclude that they were reading God's Word that day and *just happened to realize* that it was the time for the Feast of Tabernacles, quite a coincidence... so they went about the work of celebrating it. But I'm pretty sure that they knew it was the holiday season. They may have rediscovered something about how they ought to celebrate the Feasts... but a celebration was already underway.



That is why the feasts were readied. That is why the platform was erected and the place was prepared. That is why the people gathered. And that is even why they called for the Word of God. It was **tradition**.

We know this about the human condition. We may lose track of the sacredness of a holiday... but we easily hold on to the traditions of celebrating and feasting. We could forget about the sacred roots and foundation of a holiday... but the food and other celebrations frequently remain in our traditions.

Anything sound familiar about that?

They were gathered for the holidays. The place was readied and the feasts were prepared... but it appears they were not prepared to encounter God and His Word so powerfully that day.

Could we find ourselves in the same circumstances?

Here we are on the verge of our culture's holiday season. Halloween is over which apparently means it is Christmas now... at least according to the stores and some of the people in our neighborhood who have lights on their houses. We are in full preparation mode around here. The choir is rehearsing. We'll welcome the community to our Bazaar on Saturday. We'll deck the halls. We have plans for special services, celebrations, and even feasts. It is tradition! And tradition is wonderful.

These traditions in the days ahead are, of course, rooted in our faith.

At Thanksgiving we may be thankful **to one another** and **for one another**, but we know that the foundational meaning of Thanksgiving is to give thanks to God, our Provider.



At Christmas there will be all sorts of traditions that are simply out of the imagination of our culture, Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, the Grinch, and Buddy the Elf and all. There will even be romanticized images of angels and shepherds and wise men and that cute little baby. But the profound truth that serves as the foundation of it all is that God became man. Jesus burst into the history of humanity to save.

Could **we** find our traditions overwhelmed by the power of God through the Word of God in these days ahead? Could we find that for ourselves? Could we who believe find something rich and meaningful, perhaps in a new and powerful way, in the midst of our traditions? Could we devote ourselves to God's Word this season, searching it... and find that it searches us?

And could we find ways to bring God's Word to the culture? Could God's Word at this time of year invade our families, our workplaces, our schools, our networks and such? Could these be days when God uses **us** to take the structure of our traditions and fill them with people... perhaps even unlikely people? And could these be days when the people that fill our structures, our homes, and programs, our church buildings and such... could these be days when the people that fill these structures are filled with the Word of God? Could these be such days when hearts are touched and drawn to the Lord?

Would you join me in doing something about it?  
Would you join me in praying for it?

The need is great.

Let's pray to these ends.

Let's see what God might do, how He will provide.

And let's welcome people to meet Jesus.

Perhaps you are here today and you are not yet a believer, you are not found Jesus to be your Savior, you have not taken that step of faith... stepping away from sin and the world and to a believing life in Jesus. Do you think it is an accident that you are here today? Make today your day to believe.

And all of us have this opportunity before us to take another step of faith. Let's take another step in devotion to God and His Word... and another step with God in His work to fill His world and His people with His Word.

