The Church: Our Obedience

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[0:00] Well, our Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings are combining again into one path.

! On Sunday mornings, we're looking at the church, what we are to do as a church. On Sunday nights, we are walking through the book of Nehemiah. And Nehemiah chapter 8 just happens to be one of just the really stalwart chapters in the scripture. One of my absolute favorite chapters in the Bible as it shows us what real trust in the Lord, real desire for His Word looks like, shows us how we're to respond to the Word of God. And while this is Old Testament in Nehemiah 8, it serves for us, I think, as a great example of how we today should respond to the Word of God. And so this morning, we're going to look at the first part of Nehemiah 8. Tonight, in our evening service at 5, we'll look at the second part of Nehemiah chapter 8. We've got about maybe three more messages we're going to do in this church series. We're going to look in the next couple of weeks at the friendships of the church, the importance of relationships.

We're going to look at the Lord's Supper and baptism and why we do that, what it means. And then, Lord willing, we're going to culminate it as we think about as a church preparing for heaven and heaven as our eternal home. That what we are doing here is preparing our hearts for what the Lord has for us for all eternity. On Sunday nights, we've got about five chapters left. And so, this morning, we're just going to kind of combine our two studies here as we look at Nehemiah 8, but specifically through the lens of what this would mean for us as the people of God and how we are to respond to His Word. When you're in Nehemiah 8, the people have been away in exile.

They're exiled away to Babylon. The people have returned, not all of them, but the ones who are coming back have returned back. When they come back home, the temple needs to be rebuilt. That's done. When you get to Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah, the problem here are the city walls are in shambles. And so, Nehemiah rallies the troops as the Lord has raised him up to be the leader to help the people to rebuild the wall. The rebuilding of the wall serves as a bit of safety for the people, but it's also about being back in the land and having a place of honor, having a place of worship before the Lord, having a place that is not an embarrassment to them, that they would, now that they're back in the land, dwell in the land and live there and conduct business there and to do all the Lord had called them to do. Specifically in chapter 8, the people come asking for the book, the word, the law to be read to them. And the issue in Nehemiah 8 is that while the walls have been rebuilt, they needed more than just physical structure around their city. They need their hearts revived.

Nehemiah 8, I think, serves for us as a helpful blueprint of what should be true of us when we gather together. We're going to read about a people in Nehemiah 8 that joyfully gather together to read the Word, to hear the Word explained to them, and then we're going to see them respond with joyful obedience. So we're going to walk through Nehemiah 8 this morning and this evening in our five o'clock evening service. We'll look at this for the rest of this Lord's Day together. What do we do when we gather? Where is the power? What is our focus to be? How do we know if our hearts are in line with what God would have us to be? Where does revival really come from? Number one, write down the words that we should be centered on the Word of God. As a people, we should be centered on the Word of God.

[4:40] And next to that phrase, just write the word gather. We've got to gather together as the people of God, and as we do, we're to be centered on the Word of God. Look at Nehemiah 8 verse 1. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate. We don't know for sure how many people were there. There were many thousands that were there. We can't say for sure, but scholars and historians will estimate that it was not only many thousands, some will say as high as 40,000, some scholars say as high as 50,000. My guess is probably not quite that many, but this is a very large group, a very large gathering. And they're unified. The people have come

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together in unity, and they've come together to hear the Word of God. Now, I just want to remind you, friends, that when we gather here as the people of God each Lord's Day, this is why we gather. We want to hear from God.

There are many good things we get to do on a Sunday, and lots of great conversations, and lots of good ministry and organization that takes place, lots of wonderful fellowship that takes place, and all of that is a wonderful blessing and a gift from God. But the first and the primary reason why we set apart the first day of the week to gather together is to say, we long to hear from God. Of all the things that could be said of a church, let it be said of us, and let it be true of us, that we are a people that love to hear the Word of God. That we are devoted to it. That we don't just fit it in in the leftover parts of our life, but that we actually would care so much about gathering together with God's people to hear the Word of God, that it becomes the focus of our life, it becomes the focus of our week, and it becomes that sun which other things orbit around. Rather than saying that we fit church in, or fit the Bible in where we can, instead, we would say this is the heart, the center, the foundation of who we are. Now look what they say, and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. The people go to Ezra. Ezra's a scribe. This is the first time he's been mentioned in the book of Nehemiah. He's an interpreter of the law. He's an expert in the
Scriptures. He arrived back to the land about 13 years before Nehemiah did. And the people have cried out, and they say, bring the book. Bring the book. Read the Word. We want to hear from God. And the people gather together for a long time to listen to the Word of God read, explained, and applied.
Friends, this is a great test of our spiritual maturity as a people. How much do we love the Word that God has given us? The test of our maturity is not first about the things that we do with our gifts. It's not first about offerings that we may give. It's not first about anything else. The test of our maturity in the Lord is do we love His Word. And the people cry out, bring the book to us.
[8:49] We need this. This is the central reason why they have gathered on this day. And we need a revival in our land. Not just of Bible preaching, but a revival of people who love to hear the Word of God taught.

Not people who long to be entertained. Not people who are looking for a quick drive-through kind of worship service that we can do really fast and get on to other parts of our day. But people who would say, this is the greatest joy of our life. You can fake a lot of things in the church. It's hard to fake a love and a passion for the Word that God has given to us.
In our day, there is such a barrenness in the land, such a famine in the land, it seems, of churches who will just preach the Word. Of pastors who are willing to just read and explain the Word.
Of congregations who just love and value the Word. There's all kinds of things that churches do, but sadly, so little in most churches of just people who say, just give us the Word.
We need pastors who will settle for nothing less than to preach the Word. And we need people and congregations who demand that the Word be taught.
[10:28] Verse 2, 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.

Who's there? Men and women, and all who could understand what they heard. This is everybody there that can listen and reason and understand.
This isn't just a few. This isn't just the elites. This is everybody who can hear, who can listen, who can reason, who can think, who can understand.
And they're there for a long time. The next verse tells us they were there from early morning to midday. This is like 6 a.m. to 12 noon.
And this isn't just a few. This is thousands. And this is a reminder for us that the people of God ought to have not just a hunger for the Word of God, but an expectation for the Word of God.
[11:47] And a reminder that this is the norm for the people of God. This is why our teenagers are here on Sundays.

This is why we have our children in here with us on Sundays. because we want to give them the gift of hearing the most important thing they will hear all week long.
Now, I just want to remind you moms and dads here, expect your children in worship to listen. Expect your children to engage.

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expect your children to learn the songs. You saw that today. Kindergarteners through fifth graders singing the same songs we sing.
Learning the same truths and doctrines that we learn as we sing as adults. Parents, teach your children. Expect your children to listen. Expect them to sing.
[12:56] Expect them to engage. Expect them to be a part. You don't have to entertain your kids. Give your children the gift of high expectations.

Moms and dads, teach your children the Bible and point them to Jesus. But as you do that, one of the greatest things you will ever give to your children is that you expect something of them.
Expect them to listen. Train them to listen. Teach them to listen. Participate with them model with them what singing looks like. Model for them what listening looks like.
The men and the women and all who could understand were there gathered on the first day of the seventh month. According to Leviticus 23, this is the time of the Feast of Trumpets.
It's their New Year's Day. This is their New Year's Day. Here's the point of that. For most of you on New Year's Day, what do you do?
[14:01] Nothing. By design. For most, businesses are closed. It's not a bad thing. That's a good thing. You're home.

You've got time to be with your family. You've got time to rest. You've got time to retreat. And on their New Year's Day, because they have time, the people gather as one, unified together, and say, we're here.
We're off today. What else could we do that's better than this? Ezra, bring the book. There's nothing better we could do with our day than gather together and have our hearts focused on the Word.
And so he begins to read. He's going to read portions from Genesis to Deuteronomy.
And the families gather together. Mom and Dad, you'll give your children no better gift than letting them know that Sunday is the Lord's Day.
[15:08] And the Lord's Day, we gather with the people of God. And we sing. And we pray. And we read. And we listen.

And we obey. And this is the foundation of who we are. Give your children the gift of knowing what you do on the Lord's Day.
And I don't mean just simply that you're here. But they're here with the Bible. And they're learning the songs. And they're worshiping with us.
And they're engaging in the Word. What do we do? We are to be centered on the Word of God as we gather. Number two, from verse three, there is to be a careful listening to the Word of God.
A careful listening to the Word of God. And beside that, write down the word submit. As we carefully listen to the Word of God, we are to submit to it.
[16:11] Look at verse three. 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. This is fascinating to me. The only thing they were devoted to on this day is just wanting to know God by hearing His Word.
And as our church gathers together, let it be said of us that we gathered to hear the Word and that we submit to the Word that we read and that we study. 1 Timothy 4.13, the New Testament says this, Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. teaching. We want to read the Scripture as we're preaching and explaining it.
We want to devote ourselves to the public reading of Scripture. This is what God's people do. And so when we gather in this place on the Lord's Day, we don't need many things.
[18:03] Lights are helpful. The microphone is helpful. We don't even have to have that. We don't have a microphone.

We can do it. Ezra was reading to far more people that I'm looking at today. He didn't have a microphone. We don't have to have a microphone. Some of you are with us ladies and I did theology a couple of years ago.
All the power went out. Power didn't come back on. Now we had an advantage. Each of you had a cell phone with a flashlight. That helped us. Nobody left. I stayed and taught for an hour in the dark. Lights are wonderful. I'm thankful for them. We don't have to have them. Microphones help my voice a bit. I don't have to have it. I just need to be able to see the Bible.

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And in our day, we're so blessed and fortunate that you have your own copy of the Bible in your lap. That's all we need. If it takes more than that to get somebody here, something's wrong.
[19:08] If it takes more than that to hold your attention, something's wrong. We don't need flashy lights. We don't need expensive toys and trinkets. We don't need things to create a mood.

We don't need things to whip people up into a frenzy. You just need people who say, I want the book. And a man of God who will stand in front of the people and say, I'll give you the book and let us just read it and submit ourselves to it and say, there is nothing greater we could do than just be truly people of the Bible.
They gathered and they listened. It says that they stayed there. Back to the verse here in verse 3. 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. All the people listened. They were engaged.
They were there. They weren't just present. They were attentive. They weren't just physically there. Their hearts were there. Their minds were there. And I want to encourage you, friends.
[20:20] I mean, I understand we all live in a real world. We all have real trials and real issues. I understand some Sunday mornings are hard and some weeks are hard and some seasons of life are challenging. I get that.

But listen, one of the things that each of us should do on Saturday night is prepare our hearts for Sunday. And one of the things we should do on Sunday morning before we gather for worship is take time to prepare our hearts for that time together.
Because while being present is good, that's not all the Lord is after. It's a matter of are we engaged? Are we listening? Are we attentive? Are our hearts submitted to Him?
The language here is so important and the people were attentive to the book of the law. They had deep interest in it. Let me be clear.
There's really no place for boring preaching because the Word of God is not boring and following Jesus is not boring and what God has prepared for those who love Him is far from boring.
[21:22] And so, preaching and explaining the Word of God should never be dry, dusty, and boring. But do notice there is something to be said. Yes, if this was a group of preachers, I would talk to them for sure about loving the truth and believing the truth and with passion calling the people to respond to the truth.

But there's also the responsibility in the hearts of the hearers to be attentive to what the Word is saying. To not be distracting. To not be doing things that would in any way take focus off the Word and onto You.
It is so important that we would stay and listen and be attentive. You can always tell a person's love for the Lord by their appetite for the Word of God.
You can't fake that. How do you know people love the Word? Well, there's some ways in the church you can tell if people love the Word. One is that they would bring it with them.
Two is they would have it open to follow to make sure what the preacher's saying comes from the Word. Three, that they would not just be physically present, they'd be attentive. And that we would go home and do what it says.
[22:43] What does James say? Don't be merely hearers of the Word, but do what it says. So as the people of God, we want to be centered on the Word of God as we gather.

Number two, we want to have a careful listening to the Word of God as we submit to it. And then number three, there should always be this, a correct explanation of the Word of God.
A correct explanation of the Word of God. And just put beside that the Word understand. We want our people to understand. Verse 4, And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.
They built a platform so that the ones who were reading the law could be seen, could be better heard. They did some practical things to help in the time of the reading of the Word.
And then it describes the people who were there standing beside Ezra. Verse 5, And Ezra opened the book in the sight of the people, for he was above all the people as he opened it, and all the people stood.
[24:00] What's happening there? Reverence. This isn't meaning that every time the Bible is read, you have to physically stand, but it is a reminder that it is good for us to have a spirit and a posture of submission, of reverence, of awe.

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When we do our public reading of Scripture, we most always stand when we do that. Not because it's sinful if you sit to read the Bible. That's not the point. But we do want to remind ourselves that we're being called to attention when we read the Bible.
We want to remind ourselves that we want to give this our great devotion. That we're not just quickly and hurriedly trying to do something, but we want to pause and stand to give reverence to the reading of the Word.
There's an expectation here in Nehemiah 8 that the men and the women and all of those who could understand would listen and be attentive and be reverent to it.
We expect our children in our church to listen. We expect our teenagers to listen. Our first four rows are middle schoolers in the center section.
[25:19] We expect them to listen. We expect them to have a Bible open. We expect them to stay awake. We expect them to sing and to pay attention and to actually care about what we're doing and to go home and live it out.

We expect our teenagers to do that. We expect our children to do that. We expect our adults to do that not because the people on the platform are necessarily by themselves worthy of your attention. We're not even the purpose or the point. It's because what we are doing in leading you to know God through His Word is so important that it demands our greatest and most sincere devotion of everything that we do.
The people stood. Verse 6, Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands and they bowed their heads and they worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.
As the Word is being read, there's all kinds of response going on. Ezra's reading the Word and he has to stop every once in a while and just say, how great is our God?
[26:36] And as he is reading the Word, the people say, Amen, our God is great and they are responding with their hearts and with their ears and with their hands and with their bodies.

There is reverence here. Seriousness is present. Earnestness is present here. But there is response to what is taking place. There's a reason why this matters.
In our world today in the church, you can only lift up one thing at a time. You can exalt God or you can exalt man.
You can't do both at the same time. Like a teeter-totter on a playground. If you remember a teeter-totter, I was always the young, scrawny, short, skinny kid, so I was the guy I was like flung up here.
Hated a teeter-totter. All my friends thought it was funny just to sit down and throw me up. But only one could be high at a time.
[27:45] This person could jump up and maybe I could go down and they could go up, but you can't both be exalted.

The same thing is true when it comes to man and God. We can make much of God and when we do, we're brought low or we can elevate man and make much of us but if you do that, you make God small.
Here's what's happening in Nehemiah 8. They're reading the Word of God and all the people are gathered there and there's no entertainment. It's just the Word of God and the people are so overcome with the majesty of God, the greatness of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God, the authority of God, the sovereignty of God, that God is so lifted high that it brings them low.
And so they respond. Not because of artificial things that have whipped them into an emotional frenzy. It's just the hearing of the Word that has impacted them.
Verse 7 refers to the Levites who are there helping the people to understand the law while the people remain in their places. Notice that with your own eyes here in verse 7.
[29:11] It has this list of names, these Levites. It says they helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places. It seems what was happening on this day is they would read a portion of the law and then these trained leaders would go out among the people and help them to make sure they understood what was being read.

So from the platform, they would read the Scripture, explain the Scripture, give praise to God, and then these trained leaders would go among the vast crowd there and get them in groups and say, do you understand what's being read?

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Did you understand what that meant? Did you understand the vocabulary? Some of the people may have not known Hebrew very well from where they had been. They were used to speaking Aramaic, so making sure that the language part got taken care of.
Did you understand the meaning of what this was that we read? In some ways, this is like our Sunday school classes.
It's like our discipleship groups here. You've got from the platform, the Word being read and explained, and then you've got trained leaders going out among the group and smaller groups to help make sure everybody's understanding what is being said.
[30:26] Which is such a great reminder for all in our church who teach that the goal is never to sound so smart that nobody understands you but they're impressed with you.

That's not the goal. The goal is to be so clear that people get a grasp for who God is because you help them understand what God has said.
That's faithful teaching. And whether that's from a pulpit on a Sunday, whether that's in a classroom, whether that's in a living room with moms and dads and their children, the goal is not to get your listeners to think, wow, you're really smart.
The goal is to help your people see what God has said, understand what God has meant, and they leave saying, I know God more and because I know Him more, I love Him more deeply.
And so you've got the Word being read, you've got the Word being explained as an emphasis on clarity. Look at verse 8. I love this verse. They read from the book, from the law of God clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.
[31:43] They gave the sense. They gave the meaning. They explained it. They read it and they said, here's what this means. Here's what we do with this. Here's why this matters for you.

Here's why your heart needs to grasp this. Here's why your mind needs to comprehend this. It wasn't just about preaching or teaching by itself. It was helping the listeners grab the sense of what they were hearing.
This is, in the truest sense, what expository preaching is. You read it, you explain it, and you exhort the people. Make sure your people grab the sense of what they're reading.
Sunday school teachers, please don't just say enough to get through the class. Help your people in the class grab the sense of what this text means.
Bring it to their heart. Don't skip their mind. Engage their mind. But as you engage their mind, help the Word to pierce their heart by making sure they understand what it means.
[32:50] Moms and dads, when church is over and you go home, on the way home and at the lunch table, ask your children what they learned in Sunday school. Ask them what they learned in the preaching and worship service.

Ask them what it meant. There may be some things they don't understand. You've got a great biblical model here to go through in smaller groups and make sure that people grasp the sense of what was being taught.
But mom and dad, can I tell you that one of the greatest things you can do also is take time and tell your own children what you learned too? If we're not careful, we'll unintentionally model for our kids that we expect our children to come to church and learn, but we've got it all figured out.
Well, that's not true, is it? Teach your children what you're learning. Teach your children what you were convicted of. Teach your children what the Lord through His Word helped you to see and helped you to understand.
And for all of you who teach in Awana and in PDO and in Sunday School and in any way in e-groups, all the different things we do at our church, read the Word, explain the Word, and verse 8, give the sense of what's there.
[34:10] Give the explanation. Help your people understand what the point of this is. The goal of our teaching is never to impress people with intelligence or skill.

It's to make sure our people can hear and that they understand. This is the heart. Read, explain, and apply the Word.
I had the really sweet privilege this week. I spent about eight hours at Fort Sill, one of our army posts, and spent the day with army chaplains.
They asked me to come and to teach. I spent half the day talking about hermeneutics, Bible interpretation, and the other half of the day on homiletics, crafting a sermon and preaching and how to do that.

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And so I spent an entire day just talking about understanding the Word and how to explain and to teach the Word. It was a very, very sweet privilege for me to have the honor and privilege to be able to do that with the chaplains that serve there.
[35:24] And as I was teaching them, it was a great reminder from my own heart to make sure that I'm doing every week what I'm training them to do. And my mind goes back to Nehemiah 8, that here's what faithful expository preaching is.

Read the Word, explain the Word, apply the Word, and then we obey the Word. That's the heart of who we are to be as a people.
And look, I love to have fun. Our staff laughs a lot together. Our ministries at our church enjoy working together.
Our church members at our church have a lot of fun interacting with each other in fellowship and in ministry. As I walk the halls of our church all week long, I see so many people who just so enjoy being together.
there is a foundation of all that. And if that foundation is missing, then what we're doing is not working. The foundation is that everything we do is to be centered on God's Word to us.
[36:42] That's what we must have and what we must do. And I'll tell you, one of the great tests for a church, for a congregation, is what does it take to get you there and what does it take to keep you there.

It's a great test for our hearts. Our church has a lot to offer people. But if people love the world, they won't see it.
Because we're not offering worldly things to attract them, and we're not offering worldly things to keep them. What we are trying to do every week in every ministry is to read the Word, explain the Word, apply the Word, because we are convinced there is nothing that creates more true, lasting joy than you knowing God.
That's what we're to do. And you may be a young person and you've been to other churches. You may be visiting our church. You've been to other churches. You may say, man, this church just seems pretty simple.
Well, I hope so. We want to fight to keep things pretty simple. Because there's 10,000 things we could do, but just a couple of things that we must do.
[38:07] And that which is most important is what we want to spend our time doing. And in Nehemiah, what showed a heart of revival was a people hungry for nothing more than the Word of God.

And what they received that day was the reading, the explanation, and the application of what God has already said. Read it.
Explain it. and apply it. Now, something really, really incredible happens after this.
There is an understanding that the people get from the reading of the law that they had missed. And it's fascinating. And their response to what they had missed is really interesting.
But what the leaders told them to do as a response to what they had been doing wrong is even more fascinating. And we're going to look at that tonight at 5 o'clock.
[39:24] It is going to be an incredible test to see if your heart really delights in the Word.

The second half of Nehemiah 8 is so helpful for our hearts to see where we are.
But we're not promised tonight at 5 o'clock. the only moment where promise is this one. So I want to ask you this morning, do you know God?
Not just about Him, but do you know Him? We know Him by reading His Word as the Holy Spirit illuminates our heart.
And what the Holy Spirit does is direct our attention to the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect life that we could not live, died on the cross, a death we did deserve, was laid in the tomb, and was raised back to life to show His power and victory over sin and the grave.
[40:40] And Jesus Himself said, all who come to Me will not be cast out. He said, those who believe in Me, who have a relationship with Me, who have been saved by His work, that He would hold them in His hand and never let them go.

I want to invite you to come back at 5 o'clock tonight because you're going to learn something that you probably or perhaps have never seen in the text that I think will be a great insight and help for you.

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But the single most important thing about your heart today is this one question. Do you know God as revealed in His Word?
God? Maybe you've wondered, how could a people stand there for hours and just hear the Bible? How could they possibly endure that? The distinction may be whether or not you know God. If I were to hand you my phone and open up to me and Marcy's text thread and you read it, you'd pretty soon think, you guys are crazy.
[42:07] You guys aren't near as funny as you think. I don't even get why is that funny. What are y'all talking about? You'd hand it back and say, that's kind of boring. Not to me.

Because those are messages from my wife meant for me. I know her. I love her. We're joined together.
You could read it, but you'd be reading somebody else's mail. When I read it, I'm reading words meant for me. If this morning you read the Bible and you don't know God, you are in one sense. You're just reading somebody else's mail. Would you today confess your sin and ask the Lord to save you and to make you His own and to bring you from death to life and make you His very own? the Word of God is where the power is. The Spirit's what brings it alive in our hearts. And I pray that as a body we would never get tired of the reading, the explanation, and the application of what God has said to His people.
[43:32] Lord, we thank You for Your Word today and pray that You would use it to strengthen us and to equip us and to help us. You are a good and faithful God.

May we display our love for You as we submit ourselves to Your Word and delight to obey what You have called Your people to do. In Christ's name, Amen.

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