The Church Fed

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[0:00] Which means that we have a tendency to forget that Christianity is a global religion. So if you go, there's quite a variety of choices that you have.

The church is everywhere. They're in every country of the world. Every country of the world. Some are underground and some are hidden and some are visible. And they're actually part of the state, part of the government, state-sponsored.
They're rich and they're poor. They're culturally diverse. They're large and they're small. They're on mountaintops and they're in deserts. And it had to be this way because Jesus said that his kingdom was going to be like leaven.
That's hidden in a lump of bread and it was going to spread into the whole thing. And we say, so it has. It started with Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago and now the church has truly penetrated the world. It's everywhere. He said, in the same way, the kingdom will be like a mustard seed. It's the smallest of the seeds and yet it's going to turn into this great plant, this great bush, this great tree.
[1:22] And we say, and so it has. Every tribe, nation, and tongue, nearly. And there are an estimated now 5 to 10 million local churches in the world.

To which we say, praise God. They're everywhere. And if you were to visit each of these churches, you'd begin to notice a pattern. In every one of these churches, the people gather together. There's a gathering. They come together. They sing to prepare their hearts for a time when an individual is going to carry a Bible to the front of the group. And he or she, in some cases, they're going to rest it on a surface.
And they're going to open it. And they're going to read from it. And then they're going to preach, explaining what the Bible means and why it's significant for the people that are there. Why is it, with all the cultural diversity and all the diversity in language and in setting, why does every church do this?
Why do you do this? On Sunday morning after Sunday morning, you show up. You prepare your hearts. You gather with a body. You sing. And you prepare.
[2:25] There's a pastor. He climbs the stairs to the pulpit. And he opens the book in front of all the people. And sometimes he makes you stand. And if you've never been to a church, if you're the first time in a church, it's a very strange ritual that we do.

I love it that last night Joey asked us to stand as we heard the word. And Josh said, stand as we hear the word. And then somebody will preach at length, explaining and illustrating and applying what the Bible says.
Why do you do that? The answer is because 2,500 years ago, there was a gathering of people in Israel. And they created a pulpit out of wood.
And a man named Ezra stood at that pulpit. And he brought his Bible. And he read from it, beginning in the morning. And he gave the sense of what was being said to all the 50,000 people that were there.
And this has become, ever since, this is our model for what we call expository preaching. This is the model of our worship service that we all take part of every Sunday. And so with this, I hope you'll open up your Bible to Nehemiah 8.
[3:29] This is the model for preaching. And I get to explore with you in this chapter something that I am extremely passionate about. This is something that I've given my life to. This is what my degree was in.

It's in preaching because I wanted to improve so far as I am able, as many of you I hope will, in my ability to communicate the word. And this is something I do, I get to do by God's mercy and my joy, you know, multiple times a week.

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And I love it. And my model for ministry is Nehemiah 8. And I hope that as you are given opportunity to disciple, and all of you need to be discipling, as you're given opportunity to teach, that Nehemiah would become a model for you as well.
Read with me Nehemiah 8. We're going to go verses 1 through 12. And it records, And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.
And beside him stood Mattathiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maasaiah on his right. And Padaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashem, Hashbanada, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left.
[5:02] And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people. And he opened it, and the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen and Amen, lifting up their hands.

And they bowed their heads, and they worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also, Jeshua, Bonnie, Sherabiah, Jaman, Aqab, Shabbatiah, Hodiah, Messiah, Kalita, Azariah, Jazabad, Henan, Peliah, and the Levites helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places.
They read from the book, from 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 the scribe, and all 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. And he said to them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our God.
And do not be degreved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites calmed all 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 and send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.
[6:20] So five things. You can come up with more, but I want to draw your attention to five things in this text, five elements that are part of this worship service. And this is. It's a worship service culminating in expository preaching.

And the first thing I want you to see in verse 1 is that it's an assembly. Look at the assembly. Notice it. It begins with, And all the people gathered as one man. 50,000 people gather as one man for one purpose.
They're there to do one thing. They're here to hear the word of the Lord. Look back to chapter 7, verse 66. How many people were here? What was the occasion? The whole assembly together was 42,360 beside their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337.
And they had 245 singers, male and female. And it talks about their animals. I mean, this is a huge crowd. The volume is insane in that it says that they gathered together 50,000 and yet as one person.
And what does that mean? Except I believe that they're united in heart and united in mind and united in soul and united in purpose. You say, where do we get that? This is what Paul says.
[7:37] This is what we're supposed to do every time we come to church. This is the mind. Have this mind among yourselves, he says, which is yours in Christ Jesus. He says, complete my joy when you come and gather by being of the same mind.

It means literally thinking the same thing. We come together with the same purpose, to hear the word of the Lord, to think the same things after our Lord who has revealed them to us. His revelation, to have the same love, which means the love of God that has been poured out into our hearts by his spirit.
And then we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. That's how we come to church. He says, in full accord, which in the original language means soul with soul, united in soul.
Is that how you go to church on Sunday? God and Jesus Christ prays for his church that we may be one even as he is one. That we may be one even as the Trinity is one.
And his prayers are seen here. And then he goes on and he says again, being united in purpose, it's the same thing of having the same mind. It goes even farther. We are to have the same purpose and their purpose here is to hear the word of God.
[8:41] And you see them coming together and it teaches us how we're supposed to come to church. We come together as one person in unity. And this gets personified in some of the ways that we worship. There's a few ways where we demonstrate our unity powerfully on Sunday

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mornings.

One of these is the subject of the entire next session this afternoon. It's singing. It's amazing how just now there's a unique voice when all of us sing. All the sound waves get grouped together and it comes out as one man.
When we sing, our voices come together. Many voices and yet one. I got to go to a conference. I went to the same conference for 10 years and then I finally decided enough's enough. I got to diversify.
Go to some others. I went to this conference in California where 6,000 men were in a room together. And Bob Coughlin was leading and he was leading us in a song, Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing. 6,000 men in a room singing a cappella is a powerful thing.
And all of our voices were there. And the whole point of that song is that John Wesley is saying, I wish that we had 1,000 voices because that would bring the glory to God that he deserves. And here's all these men, 6,000 men in a room and we're singing this song.
[9:51] And it was so emotional. I remember about one in 10 guys had their phones out and tears are running down their face. And Bob Coughlin had to stop and just spend a few minutes just weeping because we were there to worship God.

In one mind, in one heart, united, our voices were together. We were singing in unity. And it's amazing to be a part of. And here it's not 6,000 people in Israel. It was 50,000 in one man.
Another powerful expression of our unity is in taking communion where we are confessing our sins one to another and saying, I have nothing against you. You have nothing against me. And so at the end of our service, by the way, Jesus says, as often as you are gathered, you are to do this.
This is what the church is. It's a gathering. It says the people gathered as one man. That's the word that's used in the Old Testament is kohel. It means gathering. It's the New Testament word, ecclesia, which is where we get our word church.
The church is, by definition, a people who gather. And Jesus says, as often as you're gathered, you have this point of unity, which at Heritage, we make a point to remind that we're not united because of our shared interests or our musical tastes or the things that we like to do.
[10:59] We're united in the precious blood of Jesus Christ and this common salvation. And so we say to one another at the first of every month, I have nothing against you. You have nothing against me. We start every month unified.

And Jesus says again, when we're gathered, this is what we do. Christians are gatherers, and we're compelled to do it by the Holy Spirit. If I were to take Rance, nice haircut, by the way, Rance.
If I were to take him out of this context and I were to drop him at random anywhere else in the world, what is the first thing that Rance is going to do when he gets there?
He's probably going to find a bathroom, and he's going to find a grocery store, and then he's going to find a local church because the Holy Spirit unites us as a body. And we are compelled from that moment like magnets to gather together.
We can't help but gather together. I could put you anywhere in the world, and you are going to find believers to worship with because it's what you love to do. It's what Christians do. We are, by definition, gatherers. The first thing I want you to notice, it was this assembly gathered, united in mind, soul, will, and purpose.
[12:03] The second thing I want you to notice in verse 1 is the preacher. They had a preacher. It says, and they told Ezra the scribe. We're going to speed up in a minute, but I want to stop here and say, who's Ezra?

Have you ever read this book before? In the original, Ezra and Nehemiah were one book. They go together in the Hebrew Bible. We separate it out, but it's the same story. Ezra was God's man.
He was a scribe, and what you need to know about a scribe is that they were teachers of Scripture. They were interpreters of Scripture, and they were guardians of Scripture.
What do you think the New Testament, modern-day equivalent of that would be? What is it? This is what your pastor does. He's a guardian of Scripture. He's a teacher of Scripture.
He's an interpreter of Scripture. To some extent, you are too, and we want to ask, did Ezra take his responsibility seriously? Or we might ask another question. Why did they call him and not somebody else that will never know their name?
[13:04] Go back to Ezra chapter 7. I want you to read something with me. We call this the Ezra principle. If you've never heard of it, then this is going to be an amazing day for you. Who is Ezra?

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Leading up into verse 10, verse 9 says of Ezra 7, For the good hand of God was on this man. Verse 10, For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach his statutes and his rules in Israel.
You can go back to Nehemiah 8. I wanted you to see that. Ezra set his mind, set his heart. He resolved to study God's Word, to do it, and to teach it. And when I think of this, I think of a man named George Whitefield.
If you have your bookmark, I want you to pull it out, flip it over, please, to the sponsors that are on the back page. And if you go down to the one that says Banner of Truth, you'll see a statue of a guy that's going, that's a picture.
It's a picture of a statue of a guy going like this. That's George Whitefield. And I want you to know why you know his name. He's the greatest evangelist that ever set foot on American soil, opened an orphanage in Bethesda. Benjamin Franklin at one point had to try to build a building big enough to fit the crowds that came to see George Whitefield, and he couldn't do it.
[14:18] The building was still too small, so he gave it away, and it became Penn University, where that statue now sits. They tried to get rid of that statue during the race riots following George Floyd back in 2020.

Why do we know his name? Why did God use George Whitefield to bring about the greatest revival on American soil rather than somebody else that you've never heard of? And the answer is because he prepared himself at Oxford.
When he was there, they would say that the entire town in the earliest hours of the morning was dark, and the only light that would be on would be the light above Harris' bookstore where George Whitefield lived, and he studied, and he would get up, and all of his peers and all of his friends were asleep.
He would get up in the earliest hours, and it said that he would put three books open before him. He set his mind to study. He had a Greek Bible, and he would read it, and they say that he would pray over every line as he read it.
And he would have his English Bible where he was learning to translate, and he was learning the language, and he's reading, and he's pouring over God's Word, and then over here he had a commentary. For him, it was Matthew Henry, and for you, you're spoiled.
[15:23] There's so many commentaries, and they're so cheap. All the information is available, and he would pour his heart out, setting his mind to study and to do it, and that's why God used him. That's the secret to becoming a champion for God's kingdom, and the same is true for Ezra.

They chose him because there was 13 years between Ezra 7.10 and Nehemiah 8.8, and this guy set his heart, and he studied and resolved for 13 years from 458 B.C. to 445 B.C.
And again, this is the formula. If you would be a champion of God's kingdom, there's no shortcuts. This is how you do it, and theology, Ezra would tell you, is never what you know. You have to follow his example to study it and to do it and to teach it.
Do you see why that's important? There's another guy in history named Ehrman Witsius. Would you please raise your hand if you've ever heard of Ehrman Witsius? Anybody in the back of the room? I got to see his church and kind of follow his life over the past few weeks in the Netherlands.
He has a beautiful quote that you need to internalize. He says this, No one teaches well unless he has first learned well, and nobody learns well unless he learns in order to teach, and both learning and teaching are vain and unprofitable.
[16:39] They're worthless things unless they're accompanied by practice. That's why we say with Adam Nader that theology is a way of life. You study that you may do it, that you may teach it.

No one teaches well unless he learns well. No one learns well unless he learns in order to teach, and both teaching and learning are vain and unprofitable unless they're accompanied by practice. That's Ezra 7.10. And when OBU was interviewing me to be an adjunct professor, they said, What's your philosophy of teaching?
If you're ever in a situation like this, you can answer. I said Ezra 7.10. And I quoted Erman Vitsius' quote, because that is our philosophy of teaching. That's our philosophy on life.
We set our hearts. Thirteen years before this day, Ezra had set his heart. He was determined. He was resolved. He set his face like flint to know the scriptures that he might teach the scriptures. And so while his peers were sleeping, he was studying. This is a model for you. Your peers are doing all kinds of childish things. And by the way, you need to do some of those. Some of you are not interesting people, and you need to go out and do interesting things and climb mountains and

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look through telescopes.
[17:43] But then you also need to be disciplined, and you need to open up your Bible, and you need to study and to be prepared to teach. And then you too can be a champion of God's kingdom.

When I think of Ezra, I think of John Webster's description of a pastor. Kind of a PG-13 definition of a pastor, but it's beautiful. He says a pastor or a champion of God's kingdom has the work ethic of a farmer.
He has the conviction of a prophet. He has the concern of a parent, and he has the passion of a lover. That was Ezra.
That is what he was. He was determined. And by the way, who doesn't want that kind of man or that kind of woman in charge of their organization as a leader? Who doesn't want that kind of person as the one that's discipling them or married to them?
This is the standard. And this is the path that Jesus took. As it says in Isaiah, that God taught him, there's no supernatural shortcuts to becoming like Ezra.
[18:44] Jesus learned at the feet of Mary and at the feet of Joseph. It says in Isaiah, the repetition is there on purpose. He learned line after line, line after line. Precept upon precept.

Precept upon precept. Here a little, there a little. It says that because of this in the servant songs of Isaiah, the illustration that he gives is beautiful. It says that it made Christ, this learning, into a polished arrow.
That God would hide in his quiver until such a time as he was prepared and he would use him as he saw fit. And that's what he did with Ezra. For 13 years, he polished Ezra until the moment that he needed them.
And when the church needed a preacher, who did they call? They called Ezra because he was prepared. He was ready. He had been made a polished arrow.
He had been made a sharp sword, Isaiah says. And that's not to cut to wound people. He's a sharp sword because he was able to pierce hearts with spiritual truth. And they wanted that.
[19:41] They needed that. We crave that. He was faithful. He made himself ready. He made the moment for the man. God created the moment for the man and the man for the moment. And now you see it in Nehemiah 8.

And now because of that, we move to the third point, verse 1. I want you to see the request that the people make. You see the assembly. You see the preacher. And now look at the request. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book.
They told him, bring us the Bible. The Bible is the word of God. And with one heart and with one mind and with one soul, they say, bring the book. Give us the Bible. They don't say, hey, Ezra, can you come share missionary stories and some cool experiences from your life?
That's not what they wanted when they gathered together. And they didn't say, Ezra, can you share with us some pseudoscience and pop psychological wisdom that's coming out of the medical field and the scientific fields right now? They didn't say, hey, can you show us a big diagram of our brain and then teach us how our brain works?
And they didn't say, hey, can you show us the latest movies and then apply some moral principles from those movies? That would be really helpful. They said, bring the book. Give us the pure milk of God's word.
[20:51] They were craving it. So 1 Peter 2 says, this is your heart. They long for it like newborn babies. Long for the pure milk of the word. I have a baby with me. I've had two. My wife's had two. I helped raise them.

And they, I did not have to teach them to cry for milk. They cried until we brought milk. And so it is with the church. You don't have to teach the church to love the word of God.
The congregation will cry for it until they get it. And if they don't get it, they will go somewhere else. As Jeremiah says, my shepherds, my leaders are stupid. Therefore, I will divide their flock.
And they're going to go somewhere searching in a famine for somewhere they can hear the word of God. It is with the gathered congregation. They say, bring the word. It's like honey to them. Psalm 19. Sweeter than the taste of the honeycomb.
It says it makes you grow up into Christian maturity. It's what brings you to salvation. It's what saves and redeems your soul. It's powerful. Hebrews 4.12.
[21:50] For the word of God is alive and what? And powerful. And it's sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing it even to the division of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow. And it

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discerns the thoughts and intents of your heart.

No one knows a man like God knows a man. And you look in the Bible and it's a mirror that teaches you how you are and it's a standard that shows you how you ought to be. And there's power in it. Romans 10.17. So faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of God.
As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news. So until the time of the Reformation, 500 years ago, if you were to step into a church, all of the architecture, every line of architecture of the church was pointing to an altar where priests would do mass.
And this is where they believed, we'll say they believed that at mass they were turning bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Jesus. And when they do that they would say this formula, haces corpus meum, which means this is my body and the people didn't speak Latin, it was a big problem.
And so they thought they were saying hocus pocus, that's where that comes from. And when they did that, this was the focal point of their gatherings. And this changed with men like Calvin and Zwingli.
[23:09] And Zwingli in two weeks at the Reformation tore out every altar from every church in Zurich. It's an incredible feat, him and his army. And he replaced every altar with a pulpit to preach from.

We say, why did he do that? He did that because Ezra the scribe did not stand at an altar and perform a mass. He stood at a pulpit made of wood and he preached God's word.
And that is our model. D. Lloyd-Jones, that famous doctor out of London that became a Welsh preacher, he said the first thing he did when he came to his church was fire the drama team. And to make a statement, he took a pulpit and he put it in the middle of the room and he nailed it to the floor, telling his congregation in this metaphor, we are people of the word here, this is what you can expect from me.
You're going to get the Bible. In Calvin's Geneva, he saw that every line of architecture in the church was pointing to an open Bible because that's what they're about there.
And even today, you have people trying to get this point across, some Presbyterian denominations. You'll see at the beginning of the service, a servant will climb the stairs of the pulpit in front of all the people. He'll open the Bible before everyone to the passage that's going to be preached.
[24:23] He'll come down from the stairs and he'll lock the Bible into the pulpit. It's very dramatic. It's a little more dramatic than we are at my church. But the point is made. And sometimes we'll say in our Southern Baptist churches we'll hear the critique, well you're elevating the preacher.

You're putting the preacher up there and you're giving him a pride and an ego and he's up all the steps and that, we're saying no, we're elevating the word, the Bible, because God rules and reigns in this world through an open Bible into a submissive heart.
Hear again the cry of the people. Bring the book and you submit to God in this world when you submit to this book and your hearts are attentive to it. And if your pastor forgets his calling you can remind him of this verse.
And when you have the opportunity to teach or as you grow up into salvation and you have the opportunity to preach, may this be your model. Don't neglect that Nehemiah 8 teaches that the Bible is to be central in all of your teaching.
It's central to this relationship. And look at verse 2 with me. Ezra grants their request. 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.
[25:34] It tells you when this happened. It was the first day of the seventh month. We sometimes, we're so foreign in culture we forget some of the details sometimes but this would be, this would make your ears ring in Israel like if you heard it was 12 a.m.

on January 1st because the first day of the seventh month is the Jewish New Year. This was the fresh start. This was the new beginnings and when you look at this in history they've just come back into the promised land from slavery and Babylon.
And so here you are they're back in their own homes. They're back in their own land. It's the first of the year. It's a fresh beginning. It's a fresh start in every way and so what do the people cry out for? What do the people want? They say, feed us by your word.
They need to hear from God. Which is why the logical next priority, the fourth point I want you to see the fourth theme I want to draw your attention to is the sermon and these kind of few events

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that lead up to the sermon.
And this summer camp, the theme this year is the church and I thank God for Joey. I always get nervous when someone says let's define what a church is and I'm like, oh Lord, there's a lot of ways you can go with this.
[26:42] He nailed it. It's perfect. The historic definition. There was an interesting time as you came to the Reformation where you have the universal church recognizing that the local church had become corrupted and so kind of for the first time in history they're going to have to say, okay, if this is what it doesn't look like, if this Catholic local congregation with its mass and its Latin sermons, if this is not what it's supposed to be then what is it supposed to be?

And so you have the universal church coming together to try to define what a local church is and the first person to do this at length and really give this an effort was in 1530, Philip Melanchthon, he writes in the Augsburg Confession that where you have the word of God preached, listen closely, and heard and where you have the sacraments, baptism in the Lord's Supper rightly administered, there it's not to be a doubt a church of the living God exists and Joey said that so well last night you see the word, he said you see the word preached, you hear the word preached, you see the sacraments, you see the word and these little dramas that we put out, that we do as a church, where these are you have a church, that's what makes a church different from a Bible study or a life group or anything else and it's interesting, I want to draw your attention to the fact that this and every subsequent confession since then nearly all of them have jumped on board and they say where the word of God is preached and heard, this is the first mark of a true church, the word preached and heard and it's not a monologue because preaching involves everyone in the room, you're listening to what I'm saying and you're reading it for yourself and you're discerning using your keys to the kingdom to say being Berean, what you're teaching is truly what God is saying and you're interacting and you're nodding along and you're saying amen or some churches do it a little better than others, you're interacting, it's a dialogue, it's not a monologue, we're all in this together, it involves everyone, it goes on to verse three, so Ezra read from it from early morning until midday, only observation I want to make of that is like this is an adult sized portion of scripture, this is hours of scripture reading together and listen again as we continue in verse three, and all the ears of the people were attentive to the book of the law, this is not hearing a sermon, this is active participation, dialogue and a message, the word is preached and it's heard, everyone is involved, verse four, Ezra stands on a wooden platform that they made for this purpose, just to say that this was an intentional gathering, this didn't happen by accident, they prepared for this, verse four, the other pastor stood with him, for me at our church, there are seven pastors that I'm one of and I read this and he was not alone, he had the collective wisdom and I read it as all these names I can barely pronounce, but when I read it, I hear Britton Buss and Steve Klober and David Houghton and John Burgess and Jim Hansford and Paul Riggins, the men that labor with me, they're all there teaching and they're all there making sure that the people understand, verse five, it says that he opens up the book and the sight of all the people and here's where it gets truly dramatic because as the word of God opens, the involuntary response of all the people is to stand and nobody had to ask him, Joey didn't have to say, hey, please stand with me, the Bible comes out and they honored the word, it was an involuntary response and we were trying to replicate this sometimes on Sunday morning as we say, stand, let's honor the word, let's try and do what Ezra did and the people did when they were so on fire for God's word.
Verse six, in this dramatic fashion, Ezra blesses the Lord and he would have offered powerful and exclamatory statements like, praise be to God the Father who has taken us from captivity in Babylon, he has opened up a new exodus and he has brought us home and all the people, it says, raised their hands and they said, amen, amen, which means yes, that's right, may it be so, that's exactly what God did and so their postures of worship, as it said, some lifted their hands high and they shouted and they exclaimed and others bowed their heads low in worship and conviction and they had their faces to the ground and Ezra continued to cry out, how worthy, how blessed is Yahweh who did not abandon us to captivity.
We say similar things today, how blessed, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has redeemed our souls from the pit of emptiness. He's taken us and given us light and salvation.
[31:09] That's something that you should say amen to and he said, maybe quoting Jeremiah who said he's gonna send fishers to come and fish men out of Babylon and send many hunters and he

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would've said he sent fishers for us and he's brought us out, he sent hunters and brought us home and he's spoken to us through his word and all the people cry amen and amen.

And verse eight, it all culminates with expository preaching. The pastors, it says, they read from the book. Look at verse eight with me. They read from the book from the law of God clearly and they gave the sense of it.
You can look at even the marginal notes in your book and it'll say with interpretation or line by line, expository preaching for the reason it says so that the people understood the reading because God is an extroverted God and he loves to reveal himself and to make himself known to anyone who will seek him.
He has done it through this book and it says the word has gone out, God has revealed himself and the people have understood. Look at verse 12. And all the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them.
Praise God. The people understood. That's the point. John Calvin was once asked later in his ministry, what's the most important thing that you did in your life?
[32:34] How would you answer that question? The most important thing that I did in my life was, he said, preaching. One word. Joel Beakey, one of my professors, was asked a similar question in our own day, in our own era.

He said, he was asked, what's the most important thing that your people will ever do in their life? His answer, participate in preaching. And he didn't say, participate in my preaching.
He didn't say, hear sermons, right? The word of God or the church is the word of God preached and what? Preached and heard. Participate in preaching is what he said because that's what the local church is because through the foolishness of preaching and the foolishness of what we preach, God saves men and women.
He saves them from hell. And by what is preached, he transforms you into the likeness of his son, Jesus Christ. And through the foolishness of what we preach, he builds his church and he unifies congregations.
It's incredible. The power is in the word. This is what we say when we say, the church has been fed. This is the church fed when the word of God is open to him. This is why when Paul commissions Timothy, he could have emphasized anything.
[33:47] Some of the final words, the last chapter he ever wrote in the Bible, he writes to his disciple, Timothy, and it's a solemn event. It's sobering. He says, I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who's the judge of the living and the dead and by his appearing and by his kingdom, preach the word.

Coruscant, tonlogon. That was his command to him. And so our Sunday mornings have a model in Nehemiah 8. And this is expository preaching.
And it feels like the message should end here. Right? The people have heard the word. It's all there. They've preached it. They've gathered. They've been affected by it. The word has gone out and they understood it.
But there's still a fifth point. The passage doesn't end here. I want to draw your attention to the response. You get this whole paragraph between 9 and 12 which records the response of the people to the word preached.
And I want you to see, let's read it. You'll see for yourself, Nehemiah 8, 9 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.
[34:58] Do not mourn. Do not weep. For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. And he said to them, go your way. Eat the fat. Drink sweet wine. And send portions to anyone who has nothing.

For this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites calmed all of the people saying, be quiet for this day is holy.
Do not be grieved. And my favorite, all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions. That means send portions to those who were too poor. The Levites didn't have jobs. They couldn't just go and buy for themselves.
They were generous. They sent portions to one another. They made great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them. Two-fold response from Israel. They wept

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and they rejoiced.
It's kind of oxymoronic, right? But it's both. And you've been in sermons before where you see Jesus Christ in a new light that you've never seen him in again. And in your joy, you weep.
[35:54] And you see yourself in your own sinfulness and it's exposed as the word goes out and it convicts your heart and cuts your heart and turns it from stone into flesh and you weep.

And this has even become a measure to me of whether I'm ready to preach a text as whether it has gotten emotional for me in my preparation because when I begin to get emotional over a text, it means that it's doing its perfect work in me.
It means that I've set my heart to study it. It's working in me that I might do it, that I might teach it. And then I'm ready to share that flame with somebody else. And even when you hear joyful sermons, it affects you.
And then they celebrate, it says. They weep and they celebrate. Look at verse 10. The commandment from the leaders. Go your way. Eat the fat. Drink sweet wine. Send portions to those who have nothing ready.
Look at verse 12. They do it and all the people went and they ate and they drank. I let some kids that we did ministry with, it's been, I could safely say many years ago now, I think.
[36:56] I'm getting old. I let some of my student leaders, not a church, but a parachurch ministry, house sit for me while we went out of town.

And when we got back, there were some things missing because they had thrown a party. This individual had thrown a party, had drank a little too much, passed out, and everybody that she had invited to my house, I don't think you can call it burglarizing because they were welcomed in.
They took everything from me. They took everything that I owned, they leave, and it's interesting when you're deprived of everything, what you miss.
And the things that I missed most, I realized, were not the things that I thought I would miss. There's two things that I barely remembered I had. I was sad about two bottles of wine that were up above the cabinet.
One of them was a gift that my wife's parents bought for her on the day that she was born in 1990. And she had carried it to a dozen houses house to house and we were waiting for a moment that was going to be grand enough that we felt this is monumental enough that we can open this bottle of wine.
[38:04] And the second one was like it. Her parents had got her a bottle of wine on our wedding day. And we had been carrying it house to house, waiting for an opportunity that we can open this. And when we came home from the trip, one of the first things I saw was these two bottles of wine drank, they were on the floor.

The opportunity was literally stolen from me. And so I think Ezra speaks to this situation. He would make a suggestion saying in effect to my wife and I, you know what would have been a good time? You know what would have been a special occasion, an occasion worthy enough of opening this bottle you've been carrying for 24 years?
He says, why not celebrate when the Lord of hosts spoke his eternal word to you in your local church? And you were listening intently and you understood it and it transformed your heart and it transformed your mind and it transformed your soul.
That would have been the right opportunity. And that's what he's saying. Why not celebrate that God has made himself known to his gathered congregation? Right. And you were there with receptive ears and you understood them.
That's opportunity for celebration. He says, celebrate that. It was a commandment from the leaders. If you're a Southern Baptist church, you can close your ears at that application. It was a command. He said, go and celebrate and this is the expression of it.
[39:20] In verse 12, and they were obedient. The people went their way to eat and to drink and to make great rejoicing and it tells you why they understood God's word. They were fed. And God has appointed a time for this in your life.

Every week, you get to step into Nehemiah 8. You can enter into this joy and in this celebration and experience this for yourself. It's on Sunday morning. It's become so commonplace.
We just call it going to church. It's going to church, but this is what it really is. I hope that you can see that this is a gathering of people. It's a local church. That's literally what the church is.

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It's a gathering. You get to come together with God's people to make His invisible kingdom visible on earth. And you do it every Sunday morning. And you come together to hear the word of the Lord and to understand it so that you can do it so that you might teach it.
And you see all the responsibility that theology for you must be a way of life. You call it going to church, but I hope, after reading and spending 45 minutes in Nehemiah 8, I hope that you have a new appreciation for what you and your church do on a Sunday morning.
[40:27] I want to echo the words of Joey where he says his prayer for you is that the church would be the center of your life. I want to say it stronger. I want the church, my prayer is that the church for you, your local church, would be the center of your universe.

That everything would revolve around it. That you and your friend groups and your family and your siblings, that it would be everything to you because that's what God meant for it to be. It is the beachhead in this enemy territory.
It is a foretaste of heaven when you come together. It's a picture of your unity. It's the invisible kingdom made manifest to the world. And the significance is what led the author of Hebrews to say, don't neglect meeting together as is the habit of some.
And all the more as you see the day coming. All the more cherished this. And how could you neglect a weekly foretaste of heaven? And Ezra says that this is the premier purpose of our gathering.
We gather together, we do many things in our service, but the pinnacle of that is the preached word. This is how the pastor disciples everybody together. This is how all the church is built up and fed spiritually.
[41:31] And I want to remind you the words of Calvin who was asked, what is the most important thing that you did in your life? Preaching. Beaky. What's the most important thing your people will ever do in their life?

Answer. Participate in preaching. Because the word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword. And we confess that God rules and reigns in your heart and in this world through an open Bible.
Correctly understood. Please pray with me. Lord of all glory, we come to you in the name of your son and say thank you for redeeming our soul, for giving us your Holy Spirit who unites us together. As Joey said last night, we're not left alone in this world. When everything seems crazy, we think of, you know, there are 7,000 men who have not yet bowed the knee to Baal. There is all the craziness in our culture.
You've given us this local body that understands, and they understand the somberness of the world and the soberness of the world and the glory of Jesus and you've given us a body, a friend group. You've given us relationships that run deeper than blood, Lord.
[42:46] And for that, we say thank you. You've revealed yourself to us in your word. You've taught us how we can live a successful life, how we can live the right way, how we can live well, how we can have joy in the world. And Lord, we pray that even as you taught your own son line after line, precept after precept, this word, we pray that you would teach us that we might be two-edged swords, that we might be fletched arrows, ready to be fired at any point that you determine by your will that we need to be there and what we need to do.

Teach us. Make us champions of God's word. Help us to study with the mindset that we study in order to teach. We study in order that we might bring this theology to others. God, thank you for your salvation.
Thank you for your word. And as we come together to confess this week, Lord, thank you for your church. We pray for her knowing that you love her and we pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen. Stand together. Speak, O Lord, as we come to you to receive the food of your holy word and take your truth planted deep in us shape and fashion us in your likeness.
take it. Take it. fathers on the star. Everygo one fathers on the town. fathers on the

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