

Nehemiah: The Work Before Us

WHEN THE WORD COMES ALIVE

Nehemiah 8:1–18

Sunday, October 25, 2026

INTRODUCTION — THE WALL WAS NEVER THE POINT

Last Sunday, we spent some time considering a chapter of Scripture that most people probably wouldn't choose as their favorite passage in the Bible. Nehemiah 7. Seventy-three verses. A long list of names, families, and numbers.

And yet, tucked away in that genealogy was a wonderful reminder that God remembers His people, keeps His promises, and works through generations of ordinary men and women.

We said something last Sunday that I want to remind you of this morning: **The wall was not the point.** The wall mattered. The work mattered. But the wall was never the point. God was restoring a people. And that brings us to Nehemiah 8.

The wall has been rebuilt. The gates are in place. The people have been counted and identified. Jerusalem is beginning to look like a city again. But there's still something missing. You can rebuild a wall without rebuilding a people. You can restore a building without restoring a relationship with God. You can organize a congregation, establish its ministries, repair its facilities, and fill its calendar—and still miss the very reason the church exists. When we arrive at Nehemiah 8, something wonderful happens.

The people gather together. But they aren't gathering to admire the wall. They aren't gathering to congratulate Nehemiah. They aren't gathering to celebrate their organizational accomplishments. **They gather to hear the Word of God.** And that is where the real work of restoration begins to become visible.

God's Word is not merely something we are called to hear. It is truth we must understand, receive, and allow to shape our lives.

That's what I want us to consider this morning. (Read text)

We live in a world where access to the Bible has never been easier. We have Bibles on our shelves. Bibles on our phones. Bibles in our churches. We have study Bibles, audio Bibles, Bible-reading plans, podcasts, and more Christian resources than most generations could have imagined.

And yet, I wonder whether all that access has sometimes made us less attentive rather than more attentive. Here's the question I want us to wrestle with. **We are surrounded by Bibles, but are we being transformed by the Word?**

That's not a question about how many Bibles you own. It's a question about how much authority God's Word actually exercises over your life. And Nehemiah 8 gives us two important truths to consider.

1. IT'S POSSIBLE TO HAVE GOD'S WORD WITHOUT HAVING A HUNGER FOR IT.

Nehemiah 8:1–8

Look at verse 1. The people gather together at the square in front of the Water Gate. And notice something remarkable. They tell Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses. **The people ask for the Word of God.** That's important.

Nehemiah doesn't have to send someone through the streets begging people to attend. Ezra doesn't have to manufacture interest. The people themselves want to hear what God has said.

Now, when the passage refers to the Book of the Law of Moses, that is referring to the Torah—the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. We aren't told precisely which portions Ezra read that morning. But we know the people gathered to hear God's instruction.

And according to verse 3, Ezra read from early morning until midday. For hours! Now, imagine what would happen if a church today announced that next Sunday the worship services would consist of several hours of reading Scripture aloud. No music. No clever sermon illustrations. No coffee. No sitting. Just standing together and listening to the Torah.

That congregation would discover rather quickly how many of them really believe the Bible is important!

And I say that with a smile, because I'm not suggesting that the length of a worship service determines its spiritual value. But I do think there's something here worth considering. These people were hungry to hear from God.

Verse 3 says, "All the people listened attentively to the book of the law." They weren't merely present. They were attentive. They wanted to know what God had said. And that raises a question for us. **Do we approach Scripture with that kind of hunger?**

ACCESS IS NOT THE SAME AS APPETITE

Having access to God's Word isn't the same thing as being shaped by God's Word. We can own several Bibles and rarely open one. We can attend church every Sunday and spend very little time thinking about Scripture the rest of the week.

We can listen to sermons, participate in Bible studies, and even know quite a bit about the Bible without allowing it to exercise much influence over our daily decisions.

And here's where I want to challenge us. We make time for things we consider important. If there's a game we want to watch, we know when it starts. If there's a television series we enjoy, we find time for another episode. If we're planning a vacation, buying a vehicle, or making a significant purchase, we can spend hours researching our options. And there's nothing inherently wrong with any of those things.

But if we consistently find time for everything else while neglecting God's Word, perhaps we need to reconsider what our schedules reveal about our priorities. Not because reading the Bible earns us God's approval. It doesn't. But because people who love God ought to desire to hear what He has said.

Think about the relationships that matter most to you.

If someone you deeply love sends you a letter, you don't leave it unopened on the kitchen counter for six months. You read it because you care about the person who wrote it. Now, Scripture is far more than a personal letter. It is God's inspired, inerrant, divine revelation, given through human authors, revealing His character, His purposes, His commands, and His saving work.

But the question remains. **If we say we love God, why would we be content to remain unfamiliar with what He has revealed?**

THE PEOPLE WANTED TO UNDERSTAND

Now, there's another important detail in these opening verses. Ezra isn't simply reading while everyone listens. The Levites are helping the people understand. Look at verse 8.

“They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.” This is a wonderful picture of the ministry of teaching. The people weren't simply exposed to words. They were helped to understand their meaning.

And that matters because the goal of biblical teaching isn't merely to transfer information. It's to help people understand what God has actually said. We don't honor Scripture by twisting it to support whatever we already believe. **We honor Scripture by studying it carefully, understanding it faithfully, and receiving it humbly.**

And sometimes that requires someone else to help us see what we've missed. That's one reason God gives us teachers. It's one reason we gather for worship and Bible study. It's one reason we need the fellowship of other believers.

Because sometimes the things that make perfect sense inside our own heads look quite different when we examine them together in the light of Scripture. And that brings us to our second truth.

2. GOD'S WORD IS MEANT TO CHANGE US, NOT MERELY INFORM US.

Nehemiah 8:9–18

Now, as the people begin to understand what they're hearing, something happens. They begin to weep. Look at verse 9. The leaders tell the people not to mourn or weep, because the people are weeping as they hear the words of the Law. Why?

The text doesn't explain every reason for their tears. But it's reasonable to understand that hearing God's commands brought a painful awareness of how far they had fallen short. They were hearing the covenant instruction God had given His people. And as they understood it, they recognized that their lives and their history had not always reflected faithful obedience.

Have you ever had that experience? You read a passage of Scripture that you've read before. Or you hear a familiar passage explained in a way that helps you understand it more clearly. And suddenly you recognize something about yourself that you hadn't been willing to acknowledge.

Maybe it's pride. Maybe it's bitterness. Maybe it's an attitude toward another person. Maybe it's the way you've been speaking to your family. Maybe it's something you've been excusing for years. And the Word of God confronts you. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes conviction is evidence that we're finally paying attention.

WHEN OUR THINKING NEEDS TO CHANGE

There's a wonderful little observation in A. A. Milne's *The House at Pooh Corner*. Winnie-the-Pooh, who frequently reminds us that he is a Bear of Very Little Brain, observes that, “*When you are a Bear of Very Little Brain, and you Think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it.*”¹

Now, I think Pooh was onto something. Have you ever been absolutely convinced you were right about something? You'd thought it through. You'd considered the possibilities. You'd made up your mind.

¹ A. A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928), Chapter 6.

And then somebody asked one question, or pointed out one thing you hadn't considered, and suddenly that idea that seemed so brilliant inside your head didn't look quite as brilliant anymore! Sometimes we need somebody to help us see what we cannot see ourselves. And that's part of what is happening in Nehemiah 8.

The people hear the Law of Moses, and the Levites help them understand what they're hearing. And sometimes, when we open the Scriptures together, we discover that something we've believed for years isn't actually what God's Word teaches.

Maybe it's something we've believed about ourselves. Maybe it's something we've believed about another person. Maybe it's an attitude we've justified, a grudge we've held, or a priority we've never questioned. We've thought about it so long that it seems perfectly reasonable to us.

Until we bring it out into the light of God's Word.

And suddenly we discover that what seemed right to us isn't necessarily right before God.

TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF OUR MINDS

This is precisely the kind of transformation Paul describes in Romans 12:1–2. After spending eleven chapters explaining the gospel and the astonishing mercy of God toward sinners, Paul urges believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

And then he writes, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Rom 12:2) Notice where Paul begins. He appeals to us in view of God's mercies. Christian obedience doesn't begin with our effort to earn God's love. It begins with the mercy God has already shown us in Jesus Christ. And because of that mercy, we surrender ourselves to Him.

We no longer simply allow the world around us to determine how we think, what we value, or how we live. We allow God's truth to renew our minds.

The transformation of our minds ought to become visible in the surrender of our lives.

When was the last time you changed something in your life because of something you read in the Bible? Not because you got caught. Not because someone confronted you. Not because circumstances forced you to change. But because you encountered God's Word, recognized that something needed to change, and responded in obedience.

Have you forgiven someone because Scripture teaches you to forgive?
 Have you reconsidered the way you speak to your spouse or your children?
 Have you changed how you use your time or money?
 Have you confessed a sin that you'd previously been comfortable excusing?
 Have you reconsidered a strongly held opinion because Scripture showed you something different?

And perhaps most importantly, **What happens when the Bible disagrees with you?** Do you change your mind? Or do you begin looking for someone who will explain away what you don't want to hear?

Because there's a kind of Bible study that only looks for confirmation of what we've already decided to believe. But faithful Bible study requires humility. We come to Scripture willing to be corrected. Willing to learn. Willing to acknowledge that our preferences, traditions, and assumptions may not always be right.

Sometimes the first evidence of a renewed mind is the willingness to admit that our old way of thinking was wrong.

And that's not weakness. That's spiritual maturity.

THE WORD BRINGS CONVICTION — BUT ALSO JOY

When the people begin to weep, Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites tell them not to mourn. Why? Because this is a holy day, a day set apart for rejoicing. Listen to Nehemiah 8:10. "Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength." Now, that doesn't mean sorrow over sin is wrong.

In fact, when we reach Nehemiah 9 next Sunday, we'll see the people gathering in confession and repentance. But on this particular day, the leaders are reminding them that God's Word doesn't merely expose their failures. It also reveals the faithfulness and mercy of God.

The God who had brought their ancestors out of Egypt had not abandoned His people. The God who had sustained them through generations of failure was still keeping His promises. The God who had allowed them to return from exile was restoring them. And they had reason to rejoice.

That's important for us, too. If all we ever take away from Scripture is a list of things we're doing wrong, we're missing something essential. The Bible certainly confronts our sin. But it also reveals the God who saves sinners.

It tells us about the mercy of God, the promises of God, the faithfulness of God, and ultimately the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't come merely to give us better instructions. He came to save us. He lived in perfect obedience to the Father. He died for our sins. He rose from the dead. And through faith in Him, we receive forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and new life.

That's why Romans 12 begins with God's mercies. **Our obedience is a response to His grace, not the price we pay to receive it.**

THEY DID SOMETHING WITH WHAT THEY LEARNED

Now, notice how Nehemiah 8 ends. On the second day, the leaders gather again to study the Law. And as they study, they discover the instructions concerning the Festival of Shelters.

The Festival of Shelters was a celebration God had commanded Israel to observe, remembering how He had sustained their ancestors during their journey from Egypt. (You can read about it in Leviticus 23 on your own time, for your own edification.) And when the people understand what Scripture says, they act.

They gather branches. They construct shelters. They celebrate the festival. Verse 17 tells us there was tremendous rejoicing. Now, the point isn't that nobody had celebrated this festival since Joshua. Ezra 3 tells us that the returned exiles had observed it earlier.

Nehemiah is describing an especially significant celebration, marked by the people's renewed attention to God's Word.

They didn't simply discover what God's Word said. They changed what they were doing because of what God's Word said.

The evidence that we've understood God's Word isn't merely that we can explain it. It's that we're willing to obey it. We also understand that we cannot obey it perfectly, faultlessly. Nehemiah 13 will eventually remind us that these same people continued to struggle with faithfulness.

But we can obey it genuinely. God's Word was making a difference in their lives. And that's what I want for us. Not merely more biblical information. Not simply another sermon heard or another Bible study completed.

I want us to be a people who hear God's Word, understand God's Word, and respond to God's Word.

CONCLUSION — THE TORAH CHALLENGE

We've spent this morning watching God's people gather around the Word of God. They wanted to hear it. They wanted to understand it. And when they understood it, they responded. Now, we've asked some difficult questions this morning. And I hope we've been willing to answer them honestly.

We are surrounded by Bibles. **But are we being transformed by the Word?**

A few years ago, we had the Miller family over for supper. Jon and Julie were there with the kids. I remember throwing the football around with Jackson and Waylon in the front yard. But I also remember something Julie said as they were getting ready to leave.

She spotted our hibiscus plant and started explaining how you could dry the flowers and make a tea that was full of antioxidants and might even help lower your blood pressure.

And I remember thinking, *“Easy there, GNC!”* No, actually, I was interested! Julie knows a lot about natural health remedies. In fact, she even led a women's ministry event for our women's ministry, teaching ladies about some of the things growing right in their own backyards that might help them stay healthy.

Now, imagine if Julie came to church every Sunday coughing, sneezing, sniffing, and looking like she hadn't felt well in ages. Eventually, somebody might start wondering, *“Julie, are you actually eating any of those roots, shoots, and berries? Or are you just telling the rest of us about them?”*

Because there's a difference between knowing something might be good for you and actually putting that knowledge into practice. You can know all about the benefits of something without ever experiencing those benefits yourself. And church, I wonder if sometimes that's exactly how we approach the Bible.

We can tell people how important Scripture is. We can recommend a good Bible study. We can quote a few favorite verses. We can explain what the Bible teaches about forgiveness, generosity, humility, marriage, parenting, and loving our neighbors. But is any of it changing the way we actually live?

Are we forgiving people? Are we becoming more generous? Are we treating our families differently? Are we growing in humility? Are we learning to love people who are difficult to love? Or have we become very good at recommending God's Word to other people without allowing it to transform us?

There's a difference between knowing what the Bible says and allowing the Bible to shape who we're becoming. And I don't want us to walk out of here this morning, agree that we should spend more time in Scripture, and then go right back to doing everything exactly the way we've always done it.

So, I'm going to invite you to do something with me. For the next seven days, we're going to read selected portions of the first five books of the Bible—the Law of Moses that Ezra was teaching these people. We're calling it **the Torah Challenge**.

And don't worry. I'm not asking you to read Genesis through Deuteronomy in seven days! I've selected seven readings that will take us through the great story of God's faithfulness—from creation, to Abraham, to the Exodus, to the giving of the Law, and finally to the edge of the Promised Land.

And here's where I want to borrow a little something from Julie Miller.

Remember how she was telling me about all those wonderful things growing right in my own backyard that could benefit my health?

Well, most of us have something sitting in our homes right now that can nourish our spiritual lives, renew our minds, and help us grow in our relationship with God. And the wonderful thing is, you don't have to go out and buy anything! You don't need to order some special supplement from Amazon. You don't need to buy a food dehydrator to dry out your prickly pear cactus. (great for digestive health and bone and electrolyte support)

You just need to open your Bible. And since the weather is finally cooling off and the leaves are changing, here's what I'd encourage you to do.

Find yourself a comfortable chair on the porch. Sit out on the deck. Find a spot in the backyard. Or, if it's a little too chilly, settle into a quiet place inside with a cup of coffee. And spend some time in God's Word.

But here's the challenge. I don't want you simply to read the words. Each day, I want you to ask three questions:

- 1. What does this passage teach me about God?**
- 2. What does this passage reveal about people, including me?**
- 3. What should change in my life because of what I've read?**

And if you're willing, write down your answers. Talk about them with your spouse. Discuss them with your children. Share something you've discovered with someone in your Sunday School class or small group. Post something about what you've learned on your social media.

Because this isn't simply about seven days of individual Bible reading. It's about a congregation deliberately placing itself under God's Word together.

And next Sunday, when we turn to Nehemiah 9, we're going to discover that the people of Israel begin recounting the very history we'll have been reading throughout the week. We'll see God's faithfulness across generations. We'll see the failures of His people. And we'll see the extraordinary patience and mercy of God.

Now, I can't promise that sitting on your porch reading your Bible will lower your blood pressure. (Although, depending on what you've been worrying about, it might help you put a few things in perspective!)

Let me encourage you with this. God's Word reveals the truth about who we are, reminds us of the mercy we've received through Jesus Christ, and is one of the means God uses to transform our lives.

So, this week, find a quiet place. Open your Bible. Come to God's Word hungry to know Him. Come humbly, willing to be corrected. Come gratefully, remembering His mercy in Jesus Christ. And come ready to respond.

Because the goal isn't simply to finish a reading plan. **The goal is to be transformed by the Word.**

Hear the Word. Understand the Word. Respond to the Word.

And may God continue His work of transforming us into the people He has called us to be. Let's pray together.