



CANYON HILLS

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Series: Nehemiah

November 13, 2016

Bring the Book

Dr. Steve Walker

As we're giving, let me encourage you to get your Bible or your device close by, whatever you have. Get it open to the book of Nehemiah, in our Old Testament. If you are without a Bible of some sort, there are Bibles all around you, underneath the seats in front of you, so please grab one of those. Find the book of Nehemiah and get ready for our time in his Word.

Before we do that, though, let me acknowledge that this past Friday was Veterans Day. With all of the respect and deep gratitude we can muster for you today, our veterans, we want to thank you for the sacrifice, for the time you gave, to any loss you experienced as a result of serving your country. We praise you. I think, as a church, we should just acknowledge our thanks for our veterans. I know you're all over this service, so thank you for being here. I also know they don't like attention being drawn to them, so they know how grateful we are.

Let me also share with you that we had two of our teams, this week, return from overseas. We had two different groups of people from our church in two different places in the world: one in Chile, and one in India. Both teams are reporting that the trips were incredibly fruitful. One of the main reasons we go over to other parts of the world with the gospel is, first, to try to encourage our partners who are on the ground in those places. Many of those places are very difficult to serve the Lord and to proclaim the good news of Jesus in.

We go to encourage them, and then we go to be resources for them, and so our teams were doing a lot of teaching, instruction, evangelism, and just helping their ministry continue to flourish. Both teams are reporting that those trips went well. Thank you for all of you who prayed and gave toward those trips.

Also, the last couple of weeks, we had our annual Canyon Hills Food Bank food drive. Our goal was 25,000 pounds. I want to let you know that we have met the goal and beyond, so thank you, church, for all of your participation in that. That's huge. We do it once a year. Thousands of you brought food, and some of you gave donations of gift cards or money to get what we needed for the food bank for another year or so. It looks like we're in good shape.

Finally, don't forget this Friday. You've been hearing us talk about this a lot for the last several weeks, and we just want to convince you... We've never done something like this, so we want to do it together, making a live worship recording. Once that is all done, mixed, and in place, we're going to give a copy of that to everybody in the church. We want you to be on it, so come and sing with me! Don't leave me here all by myself this Friday! That'd be one ugly worship CD. Your job is to come and drown me out. That's what I've been told.

We get to Nehemiah, chapter 8, and it is a powerful and moving point in the history of the Jewish people. They've just come off 70 years of captivity and God's judgment for sin they just kept refusing to repent of, but over the 70 years, they eventually do repent and come back to God. By God's merciful hand, he's bringing them slowly back to their land so they could rebuild their lives, rebuild their city, and begin to live again under the sovereign love, protection, and provision of a holy God.

In this part of the history of the Jewish people, Nehemiah comes onto the scene, into Jerusalem, to head the construction project, the rebuilding project, of the walls around Jerusalem. You see, in that day, if you were a city, a nation, or a country, and you had no walls around your city, you were just a sitting duck. It was the main way to defend yourself and protect yourself in that day and age. Without that wall, they were absolutely vulnerable to being smashed and destroyed again by the enemies of God.

The wall is now built. We got to that point over the last couple of weeks. What happens next is really intriguing and really interesting. For that part of our time together, let's go ahead and stand for the reading of God's Word. We're going to pick it up right where we left off, right in chapter 8. It says,

"And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.

And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood..."

What you see in your Bibles are the names of 13 Jewish men. That's code for, "I am not going to humiliate myself again, trying to pronounce these names, so please, with your grace, scoot down a little bit to verse 5. It says, **"And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands.**

And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also..." Now we see a list of 13 Levites who are participating in this reading of the Word. They **"...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."

God in heaven, we just thank you that all these years later, we still have the Book. God, we open it again today. We read from it with great hope and great belief. God, we pray that you will, by the power of your Holy Spirit, teach us what it means. Help us to understand it. Help us to believe it. God, help us to live by faith in it. We pray these things in Christ's name, amen.

As I said, the people have returned. The wall is complete. What we have here is a chapter that is going to set a pattern for all time, for all of God's people, for the centrality of God's Word within the life and fellowship of God's people. If I were to give you a main idea as to what we are going to pull out of this passage, I would say *there is an inseparable relationship between the Word of God and the worship of God.*

If I were to say that differently, I would say *understanding the Word of God is a prerequisite to worshipping the God of the Word.* Hear that again. Understanding the Word of God is absolutely prerequisite for worshipping the God of the Word, so when it comes down to it, for the believer in Jesus...

1. *God's Word is our greatest treasure.* In fact, you might want to put our greatest *earthly* treasure, because of course we know Jesus is our greatest treasure, the Son of God, our Savior. Yet physically, tangibly, materially, in this life, we are reminded today that our Bible is our most valuable possession. For the Jewish people, the wall was complete. The city was secure. This would have been a prime moment for them to start construction on some homes to live in.

Up to this point, Jerusalem was just one giant KOA camp. That's all it was: no electrical hookups, no plumbing hookups, just a giant camp full of tents and rubble. It would have been very easy, now that the wall was rebuilt, for them to start building some homes for themselves, to start some businesses, to plant some fields, to begin some streams of income to be developed.

Yet instead, what happens in this incredible, powerful moment is the people call their priest, Ezra, and they tell him to bring the Book. What an awesome request! In fact, I'm not even sure it was a request. In verse 1, it says, "**...they told Ezra...**" to go get the Book. I would have loved to have seen this moment.

I was wondering, were they cheering, like when David brought the ark of the covenant back to the city? Were they all on the sides of the street as Ezra walked down the street, just screaming, cheering, and clapping like a giant parade? "Here it comes! The Book! God's Book is here!" I wonder if that was what it was like. Or was there maybe this hushed fear and awe, like when Moses came down off the mountain with the tablets and there was this trembling? I wonder which one it was.

What we see here in verse 3 is that Ezra read the Book for five hours, from early morning till midday, from daybreak to noonish. It says there, at the end of verse 3, basically using just their ears, they were attentive. I like that. There were no projectors. There were no screens. There

were no sound systems. There were no lights. Some of you are thinking, "Oh, bring back *that* old-time religion," right?

Before you get too excited about that, you need to remember they were also outside, and most commentators believe this was a time of year where it wasn't just a sunny, nice, warm day to gather. It was a time of year when, most likely, it was raining, a very serious rainy season when they could have been outside, getting drenched. Keep that in mind. Yet they listened while Ezra and 13 of his friends stood on a wooden box and read. It was an epic, emotional moment.

This is what I wrote as I was studying this passage. I wrote, "Oh, that more believers today would demand that their shepherds bring the Book. Oh, that more Christians today would demand that their pastors bring the Book to the pulpit." What is it about God's Word that makes it your most valued treasure and my most valuable treasure?

Scripture helps us understand that. In Deuteronomy, chapter 8, verse 3, it says, "**And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.**" Wow.

Scripture tells us real life, true life, eternal life, is found in what God says regarding our souls. You could have a giant feast, three meals a day, every day of your life, and still spiritually starve to death. God is saying, "No, we find real life from what God says." In Proverbs 30, verse 5, it says, "**Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.**" In other words, in God's words, there is no deception. There are no lies. There are no exaggerations. There is no misleading. Every single word of God is true, and we can take refuge in that.

In 1 Peter 1:25, we read, "**'...but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you.**" Every word of the Lord remains forever. Every time I read that, I always think, "You know what that's saying? There is no expiration date on our Bibles." It never, ever goes out of date. It's always fresh. It lasts forever. I like that.

2. *God's Word reveals God so we can rightly worship him.* What we get out of this passage here is that the Bible shows us who God really is. If you notice in verse 5, it says not only was Ezra standing, but all the people as well. You get the sense that they believed when God's Word was being read, God was speaking.

Folks, this is where we find our inspiration for standing for the reading of God's Word here at Canyon Hills. Twenty years ago, I was reading through Nehemiah in my personal devotions in the morning, and I was so moved by this scene that the next Sunday, I came and shared with you what I had read and how it moved me. I said, "You know what? Why don't we stand today for the reading of God's Word?"

Everybody just jumped to their feet. We've done it every single Sunday since, for 20 years. It's a tradition that has no bearing on our souls, please understand. Yet when we stand, we acknowledge that God is still speaking to us today, that God is not silent, and that we can know

God right here. There's no guessing. There's no making it up. He is speaking to us through his Word.

If you look back at verses 7 and 8, these 13 other people are introduced, these Levites, and it says, midway through verse 7, they "**...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 [meaning], so that the people understood...**" I want you to hear that. Reading the Word wasn't the goal. *Understanding* the Word was the goal.

That's the same for you and me today, both when we're here in church together, or if we're in Life Group, or if we're in our personal devotions. Just reading it for reading it's sake is a start, but the goal is that we understand it, and the good news is that it's understandable. See, as they grew in their understanding of what the Word meant, something began to happen. A true picture of God begins to appear, a picture of the true God.

Very recently, I was fishing on one of my favorite spots on Puget Sound. Where I like to go is typically right across from this majestic view of the mountains. I mean, it is just a spot that is glorious. The mountains are right there as the backdrop of where I like to fish. That day, I got there, and there was just a thick, low-lying blanket of fog that completely hid the mountains from my sight.

All day that day, I kept looking, hoping, and wondering if I would ever get to see this majestic display of God's creation. I have to say to you that knowing that those mountains were right there, right behind that fog, but not being able to see them, was really frustrating. It was killing me. All day, I just kept fishing and staring, like, "I know they're there. I know they're right there," but I couldn't see them.

One of the things that is so true about fog is when fog enters in, all color leaves, doesn't it? No brightness, no vividness... There's nothing there. Praise God, late in the afternoon, right before I was finished, the fog started to slowly lift, and everything changed. I mean, those glorious mountains in all their majesty demanded my attention. I was just staring at them. It takes my breath away every time I see them.

Now imagine, for 70 years, the Jewish people and Nehemiah knew God was real, but due to their sin and rebellion they couldn't see him. They couldn't hear him. Their sin had separated them from God. On this day that we are reading about in Nehemiah, chapter 8, the fog is slowly beginning to lift. The spiritual fog is starting to go away, and for the first time in seven decades, they hear God speak. It was seven decades, at least.

What happens next is so inspiring. I want that to be hopeful to all of us, because on any given Sunday, there are some who are here... Maybe you've been here before. You come to church and the fog of your fear, doubt, discouragement, anger, or maybe your sin, keeps you from really seeing who God really is. Every Sunday, there are those around us. Maybe you've been there on a Sunday before. For the Christian, this is a very frustrating place to be, much like that day when I was fishing.

We know God is real, but when the Book is opened and the true God comes into view again, the fog slowly lifts and we are moved to trust him again. We are moved to worship him again. That's why we are so committed to making sure every word we sing, every song we put up on these screens, that we lift up our voices... Those words are meant to point to the greatness of God, the wonder of Jesus, and the beauty of the gospel. That is why, when we get a true picture of God, the fog starts to lift. Look at what happens as God comes into view for the Jewish people.

A. *They acknowledge God's greatness.* When God's Word opens the eyes of our hearts and we see the excellence of God's greatness, that's where pure worship comes from. When God comes into view, we have to acknowledge his greatness. We don't have any choice. In Psalm 150, verse 2, it says, "**Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!**" When we begin to see the greatness of God, sometimes you feel like you can't contain it. When we see the greatness of God, it feels like it takes your breath away.

In verse 6, their response to the greatness of God was a double amen. "**And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God...**" because they had just been reading it for hours. God is great! "**...and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen'...**" A double amen denotes an intensity of emotion. It wasn't just your run-of-the-mill amen. You know, sometimes, maybe, while I'm preaching, one of you will shout out, "Amen," and I know you're listening. I know you're with me. But when you say a double amen, now I know you're more than listening, because that means something.

You see, to amen something is to agree with it. To amen something is to make something our own. One author of old wrote a book, *The Words of Jesus*. It was published in 1902, so I doubt you have it on your shelf. This author said something like this about saying amen: "When the believer utters the word *amen*, he affirms the wish that God may act. He places himself under divine judgment and he joins in praises to God."

When we're saying amen, we're saying, "God, I agree with you wholeheartedly. Do as you say!" That's what we're saying when we say amen. They were saying amen because the greatness of God was right there for them to see in God's Word.

B. *Uplifted hands.* It says, in verse 6, "**...'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands.**" They're reading the Word of God. The greatness of God comes into view like those mountains that day. They shout amen. They lift up their hands. The Jewish people lifted their hands in worship. I always thought the Pentecostals invented that. That's what I thought. I thought they came up with that. Apparently, it was happening a long time before that.

Now, there's no evidence they were being commanded to lift their hands. It was just spontaneous. That's what makes it so pure, when it's just a spontaneous response to the greatness of God. Raising our hands can symbolize different things for some of us. For some of us, it's just a surrender. "God, I give up." For others of us, it's just elation. It's like, "Yes!"

For some, it's just wanting to touch God. "God, I want to be closer to you. I want to be with you." Sometimes, it's just acknowledging that his ways and his thoughts are higher than ours.

Sometimes I notice people who are worshiping God and are just pointing to heaven, like, "You are right! You are better!" They're just worshiping God like this, just pointing to God. I don't know what it means... It means something different, possibly, to all of us, but we see it as a pure response to the greatness of God.

C. *Bowed heads.* It says, "**And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.**" Pure worship includes both elation and reverence. Bowed head, with faces to the ground... Some of your Bibles may even use the word *knelt*. That's kind of the Hebrew idea there. The word there can mean all of the above. They knelt. They bowed. They fell to the ground with their faces to the ground. It's a picture of when a camel kneels down, if you've ever seen that. It kneels down on its front legs and puts its head low.

Whatever it is, it's not done to draw attention to the person doing it. It's an acknowledgment of raw humility. Again, it isn't a command. You don't get the sense that Nehemiah said, "Okay, I just read the Word. On the count of three, lift up your hands. One, two, three! All right, on the count of three, bow your heads. One, two three!" That wasn't what was going on. It's not a command. It's just a spontaneous response to the greatness of God in view.

I think our takeaways might be, first, that *the more of God we see and understand, the more humility will flow out of us, not arrogance.* When we see God's greatness, there's nothing to compare it to, not even those mountains.

Secondly, *worship that is pure has a physicality to it.* There's a posture as well as the voice whenever you look at worshiping in the Bible. Yet we want to make sure all of our worship is moved, not by emotionalism, but by a right theology, a right view of God as revealed in the Word of God. Again, that's why we make a huge deal to make sure all of our worship is based in truth, not in emotion.

Thirdly, *God's Word reveals our need for repentance and forgiveness.* The more of God we see and understand, the more our sin gets exposed. Yes, we see the greatness of God, but we also see in a mirror the sinfulness of our hearts. If you look in verse 9, it says,

"And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law." First, this tells me when we corporately gather around his Word, God considers this a holy day.

They're weeping. They're crying. They're mourning, and Nehemiah says, "**This day is holy to the LORD...**" This day is special. When God's people gather together to worship over his Word, this is a day that is holy to God. It's set apart. It blesses God. It makes God happy that you are here today with your brothers and sisters in Christ, coming to his Word to be reminded of his greatness and his goodness. It's a blessed day.

Yet notice, in the midst of this beautiful and pure worship, we find mourning, weeping, and grieving. When I first read that, I thought, "What is going on here. Were they at the Huskies

game last night? What happened?" I'm sorry, those of you who are diehard Husky fans, but today you came to church and you were reminded that God is still on his throne, right?

Here we are. In this beautiful moment, they're weeping, mourning, and grieving. I was tempted to think, at first, that they were tears of joy, but as you read forward, my sense is that the law of God reminded them of the sin and rebellion, 70 years earlier, that had led to many of their loved ones' deaths, that had led to their cities and towns being burned to ashes and rubble, that had led to Jerusalem and their temple being reduced to a giant rockpile.

As God's law is coming through out of the reading of the Word of God, I think the Word of God was laying their souls bare and their spiritual knees were buckling under the weight of their guilt that had brought about so much devastation to their lives. In fact, if there was any pride left in them, if there was any self-justification, any anger at God at what the last 70 years had produced, what was happening right here in this moment is that the giant spotlight of God's Word was turning and peering right into their hearts.

If they were back in Jerusalem, just now finishing the wall, and if they were still mad at God or still thinking, "We didn't deserve that," or, "This wasn't fair," right here, in the weeping and tears, they are seeing, "Oh, yes it was. Based on the laws of God, we were guilty." See, that's what the laws of God show us. They show us our guilt before a holy God and stop us from justifying ourselves. This is one of the necessary powers of God's Word.

In Romans, chapter 3, verse 19, it says, "**Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.**" The law of God shows the holiness of God, and when we compare ourselves to him, our mouths get shut. We can't justify ourselves. There's no way for us to say, "Yeah, God. I know you are, but you didn't know. You don't understand. You don't know." You can't do that. In Hebrews, chapter 4, we see this is true again.

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing [as far as] the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and [able to judge] the thoughts and intentions of the heart...all [things] are [open] and [laid bare] to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Part of the power of this Book is that it shows us who we are, not in comparison to each other, but in comparison to God. That's what the laws of God are there for: to show us his holiness and his goodness, and who we are in comparison to that. Church, we can't shy away from the surgical law of God's Word.

See, the tendency, I think, with some of the modern preaching today, in large measure, is doing away with the idea of sin. One thing is for sure. As the sinful condition of man drops out of our preaching, things are steadily going to get worse. People will become more and more set in their evil ways.

I want you to listen to an excerpt of a sermon preached by Charles Spurgeon in the eighteenth century. Here's how he revealed this truth to his church that Sunday a couple of centuries ago. He said something like, "There is a war between you and God's law. The Ten Commandments, like ten great cannons, are against you and pointed at you today. The first comes forward and says, 'Let him be cursed, for he denies me. He has another god besides me. His god is his belly. He yields worship to his lust.'

Soul, you will find it a hard thing to go to war with the law, for you have broken all God's statutes and lived in daily neglect of all his commands. What will you do when the law comes in terror, when the trumpet of the archangel shall tear you from the grave, when the eyes of God shall burn their way into your guilty soul, when the great books of heaven shall be opened and all your sin and shame be punished?"

This was part of a message on the Ten Commandments. Spurgeon understood that our only hope is repentance and only God's law has the power to expose our need to repent. You see, the Word of God reveals our need for repentance and forgiveness, because we are blinded by our sin. The Jewish people that day were mourning and weeping tears of guilt, shame, and repentance, but what I love about Nehemiah 8 is he doesn't leave us there, wallowing in their tears. We're not left under the weight of God's law. We get this part as well.

3. *God's Word reveals his gracious salvation and our lasting joy.* It's a little surprising, but as we read forward, after all the weeping, crying, and wailing, Nehemiah is going to step in and tell them to stop. "Stop crying!" Look at verse 10. **"Then 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 Lord.'"** There it is again, the second time.

"And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." He's saying, "God is happy right now! This is a glorious day! You're back! You're here! The wall is up! The word is out! I am in view again! Let the joy of the Lord be your strength!" **"So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy...'"** There it is, a third time.

"...do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them." On this amazing day, back in the sacred city, redeemed from the very enemies that brought God's judgment upon their lives, the wall is completed. The law is being read. The spontaneous worship is all over the place.

Nehemiah is saying, "You have paid for your sins. You have already paid the price. Justice has been served; now God has brought you back, just as he promised he would, if you would repent." All of what they were experiencing that day was evidence of God's mercy and grace in their lives.

So, Nehemiah says, "Rejoice! You've been saved! Justice has been served, but mercy has prevailed! He's wanting to show them, "This is a glorious God, this holy God. You have seen your sin, you have felt the weight of your guilt, but now you are saved. You are rescued again,

and God is joyful. Be strong. Go celebrate." Listen, church. The gospel absolutely is a message that has the power to pierce our conscience that sin exists in us and it's our most deadly disease. The gospel has a message that...

A. *If sin is not forgiven and eradicated from our hearts it will inevitably lead to our deaths.* Our physical death, for sure, but more drastically, our spiritual death. We will be eternally separated from God in hell, unable to see him and hear him forever. That is the message of God's holiness. Yet it's only half the message. The other half is...

B. *The gospel message includes God's plan for saving sinners.* He loves us too much to leave us in our sin. His plan is, namely, our repentance and faith in Jesus, because only he could take all of our punishment. Only he could pay for all of our sins. We have nothing of any worth to offer God.

We're not going to stand in front of him and say, "God, I know I was wrong. I know you're holy. Here's my payment." No, we don't have anything to give God that's not tainted by our own sin and selfish motive, and so Jesus Christ, sinless, his own Son, pays the price with his sinless blood.

In Ephesians 1, verses 7 and say, **"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our [sins], according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us..."** Is it any wonder Nehemiah was saying, that day, "Stop crying. Rejoice"? Church, we are committed to verse-by-verse preaching and teaching of the Book, of God's Word, because in it, we see both God's coming wrath and judgment as well as his merciful plan of salvation.

I say this to you today. Bring your Book. Bring it to church. Bring it to Life Group. More important than both of those, bring it to your daily life. Every day, open the Book. Be reminded of how great God is and let him allow you to worship him spontaneously and purely as you see fit. I'm going to ask you to bow your heads for a moment.

Great are you, Lord. We praise your holy name this morning that we still have the Book to open every day. What a valuable and precious possession. God, we praise you today that in your Book, we see clearly that you are great, holy, and worthy. You are worthy, God, of our lifted voices, our raised hands, and our bowed heads.

God, we praise you today that you are not hiding behind the fog of confusion, lies, and deceptions of Satan or our world, but you are clear for all to see in your Word. God, may we be a people who say, every day, "Get the Book." God, we have gotten your Book today; now we worship you because you are great.