

Series: Exiles	Reference: Nehemiah 8:9-18	Title: As Never Before!	Date: 11.20.22
Website Writeup:			
After the exile, the people were hungry to worship God fully & correctly. The rebuilding of the Temple wall afforded the people the opportunity to honor God's Word in ways that hadn't been experienced in years. When God calls us from exile into community centered around His Word, there's reason to worship - when our hearts are committed to honoring the Lord, we celebrate Him as never before.			

Color Changes in text indicate slide changes

This is our second week of Exiles, a study of Israel's return to worship. Last week we said returning to true worship is volitional & rooted in a deep appreciation of Scripture. That when people return to worship it can be seen in the way they respond to the Word. The Scriptures hold importance in the lives of followers because they point to God's action among His creation. We must be willing to allow the Scriptures space to run free, since in doing so God takes His rightful place on the throne of our hearts where He's worshipped with every fiber of our being.

After the exile, the people return hungry to worship God fully & correctly. The rebuilding of the Temple wall afforded them opportunity to honor God's Word in ways which hadn't been experienced in years. When God calls us from exile into community, centered around His Word, there's reason to worship - when our hearts are committed to honoring the Lord, we celebrate Him as never before.

Here, the people plead for instruction, though they hadn't kept the law, they yearned for it. Discontent & desiring better things, which God's Word brings. In V3 it says Ezra read...*from the morning until midday*. Beginning as soon as it was light (ver. 7) till noon, for six hours or more; varied by occasional exposition (vv. 7, 8), and *the ears of all the people were attentive* - fixed on God's Word, nothing else.¹

Turn with me to p335 in your pew Bibles to Nehemiah 8:9-18, and follow along as I read...*Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest & teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.*

Mourning was unsuitable for a day of such high festivity (Lev. 23:24, 25; Num. 29:1-6).² This was, the first day of the seventh month (ver. 2), the commencement of the civil year, the feast of trumpets & the anniversary of the restoration of the altar (Ezra 3:1-3). As such, it was regarded with special interest.³ When my kids were around 3 years old, there were times when they want to cry, and Kim & I said, "Nope, this is not a time for

¹ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [Nehemiah](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 80.

² H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [Nehemiah](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 81.

³ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [Nehemiah](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 81.

crying, stop.” And, they’d say, “Okay,” then stop. Funny thing is soon after they would start to laugh & smile. Sometimes we just need a jolt out of our despair.

Continuing in v10...¹⁰*Nehemiah said, “Go & enjoy choice food & sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* A nod to care of those in need, always a part of Hebrew life & worship which continues in the Christian tradition now. V11...*The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”*¹²*Then all the people went away to eat & drink, to send portions of food & to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

When the Word of God’s understood, it results in worship! Becoming not about knowledge & religiosity, but with understanding comes connection in relationship. V13...*On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests & the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law.*¹⁴*They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month*¹⁵*and that they should proclaim this word & spread it throughout their towns & in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country & bring back branches from olive & wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms & shade trees, to make temporary shelters” - as it is written.*

¹⁶*So the people went out & brought back branches & built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God & in the square by the Water Gate & the one by the Gate of Ephraim.*¹⁷*The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters & lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.*

¹⁸*Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.*

The people were reverent (vers. 5, 6), attentive (ver. 3), and persistent in renewed worship - for some six hours they all kept their places (ver. 7). Raising their hands, proclaiming, “Amen, amen!” Sometimes falling on their face. They began sorrowful (ver. 9) in recognizing their own conduct in the light of the Law. Understanding the promise of blessing, once largely enjoyed by the nation, which they’d forfeited due to sin. Experiencing the consequences which produced grief. But the exhortations of Nehemiah, Ezra & the Levites assuaged sorrow & induced celebration this festival was designed to bring. Sorrow turned to Joy (ver. 12), since they’d understood the words the Law declared, filling them with thankfulness. The Law & their history revealed God as gracious & forgiving!⁴

⁴ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [Nehemiah](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 82.

ALONE's a show where they take 10 people & place them in the wilderness by themselves, aloud to pick 10 items from a pre-approved list in order to survive, like a knife, a fire starter, bow & arrow, tarp, etc. They build shelter, hunt, fish & gather food to survive. Each one provided a SAT phone to tap out any time by calling in. The last one remaining wins a pile of money. Being deprived of basics, struggling to survive, they become extremely weighty & sorrowful. But as they go days without food & when something's finally trapped or caught, they enter a state of thankfulness, looking up at the sky, repeatedly saying, "Thank you! Thank you!" It's worshipful. When you're deprived of something, and finally have it again, you appreciate it greatly. Spice-less meals of fish boiled in a pot, or squirrel chargrilled over a fire, is suddenly the best meal you've ever had.

Israel's been scattered for years, without direction, starved of nourishment from God's Word. Now they've come back together. But this is more like the ending of *ALONE*. Able to go back home with family around the dinner table, laughing & eating their favorite foods, since this is a time of celebration with fellow Israelites!

We'd been shut down due to Covid, scattered to our homes. You'd think everyone would return to worship with a thankfulness for that from which we'd been deprived. Some did, glad to be back, hear the Word preached & to sing praises alongside others! But, many over that time decided, "I don't really miss Church." They stayed in exile. Assimilating into culture, shedding the mantle & identity of Christ just as the Northern Lost Tribes of Israel had been lost in their surrounding cultures. And others trickled back slowly to church with a dampening apathy so heavy they might as well have stayed home.

In the book *Heavenly Man*, Brother Yun tells of a time when he was in a Chinese prison with his legs broken, unable to walk. There was only one other Christian by the name of Xu in prison at the time. Xu was tasked with carrying Yun to the bathroom 3 times a day - a 3 minute walk. Yun describes how he longed for those 3 minute talks, reciting Scripture & praying with Xu - moments which sustained him during that time. Thankful worship among brothers.

In the book *Insanity of God* (p253), the author speaks of being at secret conference in China for Christians attended by pastors. While there, he noticed someone tearing out parts of the Bible & handing them to pastors. He was appalled, until he found out that very few of the pastors had a full Bible, many only had bits & pieces. One of the goals of the conference was that every pastor would go home with at least one book of the Bible they didn't already have & they were extremely grateful for it! Their boiled fish!

There are at least 5 lessons we glean from this passage. **Firstly**, we see the worth & power of the Word of God, as the enduring spring of life. Revival springs from its Truth. **Secondly**, we see the necessity & value of teachers whose goal is to bring understanding, giving the Spirit an avenue to work. For some, without good teachers the Bible remains a dead letter. **Thirdly**, we see the importance of public gatherings for instruction & worship. Everyone, along with their children should make them priority.

Fourthly, we see the conditions of obtaining benefit at such meetings. There's a desire to learn, reverence, attention, surrender of the heart to the power of Truth - a desire we can pray for! **And fifthly**, we see the conflicting emotions awakened by Gods divine Word, both sorrow & joy.⁵

We must come expectant to worship. Finding freedom not found anywhere else. At times we need others to say, "No tears today!" As the exiles had finally been given space to honor the Lord, Nehemiah calls them to a day of celebration. He says, go enjoy the Lord & His provision (8:9-10). While it might not be appropriate to celebrate all the time, it's good to hear Nehemiah's call to the people to enjoy the Lord on this day of worship. Sometimes our hearts are so heavy when we come to worship, we need to hear the Lord speak from His Word. This is what happened for those gathered to hear Ezra speak & have the Word of God touch their hearts. Gathering again there's an earnest desire to hear more of God's Word, being reminded of God's expectations to celebrate annual festivals for good reason.

It's important to understand the significance of participating in the next step of renewal, reinstating the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths, a time of joyous celebration as the Israelites celebrated God's continued provision for them in the current harvest & remembered His provision & protection during the 40 years in the wilderness. Many of those present only knew it as a story from the past. Like one of us becoming aware of the significance of baptism or communion & experiencing them for the first time. The exiles were being welcomed again into the grand narrative God had called their ancestors into, thus affirming His promises were still true.

It's amazing how when the Scriptures come alive to us, our entire countenance changes. Michael Youseff⁶ says it this way... "Only through the preaching of God's Word can we know the God who's revealed in His Word. Whenever the Word's taught, read, or preached, Jesus steps out of the pages of the book & we meet him face to face. And when we meet Jesus, He transforms our lives. If we want revival in our lives, in our churches & in our nation, we must begin by assembling together around God's Word, and we must affirm the authority of His Word over every aspect of our lives."⁶

We can't worship God as He intends unless we allow Him to transform us. We need to change our minds, if we're to change our actions. However, there must be more than just reading the Bible to see transformation. Jen Wilkin wrote a great article listing six flawed ways to study God's Word. She begins by quoting John Piper where he said... *"When all your favorite preachers are gone, and all their books forgotten, you will have your Bible. Master it. Master it."*⁷

⁵ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Nehemiah*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 82.

⁶ Michael Youseff. *God, Help Me Rebuild My Broken World: Fortifying Your Faith in Difficult Times* [Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2016], locs. 1915–1919, Kindle

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-bible-study-doesnt-transform-us/>

She says often she meets with others curious about how to study the Bible. Hungering for elusive transformation. Though they've spent years in church & Bible studies, their grasp on the fundamentals of how to approach God's Word is weak to non-existent. Unless we're taught good study habits, few of us develop them naturally. But, there's no deficit in the power of the Word. If exposure doesn't transform over years, there are two possible reasons: Bible studies lack true converts, or converts lack true Bible study.

The second reason's probably more accurate. Much of what passes for Bible study just *isn't*: while it may educate us on a doctrine or a topic, it does little to further Biblical literacy. Left to our own devices, we pursue unhelpful self-constructed approaches. Here's a list of her five from that article...

The Xanax Approach: Feel anxious? Philippians 4:6 says be anxious for nothing. Feel ugly? Psalm 139 says you're fearfully & wonderfully made. Feel tired? Matthew 11:28 says Jesus will give rest to the weary. This approach treats the Bible as if it exists to make us feel better. Aided by devotional books, or the topical index, we pronounce our time in the Word successful if we can say, "Wow. That was touching."

The Problem: This approach makes the Bible about us. Asking how the Bible can serve us, rather than how we can serve the God it proclaims. Actually, the Bible doesn't always make us feel better. Quite often it does just the opposite - feeling awesome? Jeremiah 17:9 says you're heart's deceitful above all else! There's comfort in Scripture, but context is what makes that comfort lasting & real. This approach guarantees huge sections of the Bible will remain unread, because they fail to deliver a dose of emotional satisfaction.

The Pinball Approach: Lacking a preference or any guidance about what to read, we read whatever Scripture we happen to turn to. Releasing the plunger of your good intentions, you send the pinball of ignorance hurtling toward whatever passage it may hit, ricocheting around to various passages 'as the Spirit leads'.

The Problem: The Bible wasn't written to be read this way. This approach gives no thought to cultural, historical or textual context, authorship, or original intent of the passage in question. When we read this way, we treat the Bible with less respect than we'd give a simple textbook. Imagine trying to master algebra by randomly reading for ten minutes each day from whatever paragraph in the textbook your eyes happened to fall on. Like that metal pinball, you'd lose momentum fast & be very bad at algebra.

The Magic 8 Ball Approach: The Magic 8 Ball answered your most difficult questions as a child. But you're an adult wondering if you should marry that person, get a new job, or change your hair color. You give your Bible a vigorous shake & open it to a random page, placing a finger blindly on a verse, reading it to see if 'it points to yes'.

The Problem: The Bible isn't magic, it doesn't serve our whims. This approach misconstrues the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the Word, demanding the Bible tell us *what to do* rather than *who to be*. Dangerously close to soothsaying & people used to get stoned for that!

The Personal Shopper Approach: You want to know about being a godly person or how to deal with self-esteem issues, but you don't know where to find the verses, so you let your favorite preacher do the legwork for you.

The Problem: This approach doesn't help you build ownership. Much like the Pinball Approach, we ricochet around, gaining fragmentary knowledge of many books of the Bible, but mastery of none. Topical studies serve a purpose: they help us integrate broad concepts into our understanding of Scripture. But if they're all we do, we're missing out on the richness of learning a book of the Bible from start to finish. And I would add, this approach doesn't take into account the local church community where you're known, and our shared context & goals.

The Jack Sprat Approach: This is where we engage in 'picky eating' with the Word. We read the New Testament, but other than Psalms & Proverbs we avoid the Old Testament, or we read books with characters, plots, or topics with which we can easily identify.

The Problem: All Scripture's God-breathed & profitable. Women, it's time to move beyond Esther, Ruth & Proverbs 31 to the rest of the meal. And, everyone, you can't fully appreciate the sweetness of the New Testament without the savory of the Old. We need a balanced diet to grow to maturity.

Discipleship Defined: Why do these six habits of highly INEFFECTIVE Bible study persist? Why does biblical ignorance continue, despite the good intentions of leadership to obey the Great Command to make disciples? The answer lies in our definition of a disciple. A disciple is, literally, a learner. One who follows another's teaching. But the modern church has tended to define a disciple as a 'doer' instead of a 'learner'.

We've been asked to do service projects, join home groups, get counseling, fix our marriages, join the worship team, get out of debt, help in the nursery, go on mission trips, give finances & share the gospel. But we've so rarely been challenged to pursue the most fundamental element of discipleship - earnest study of the Word. Yes, a disciple does things, but actions must be motivated from love for the God revealed in His Word. Stop waiting for others to call you to be what Christ already has already called you to be. Be a good student. Read repetitively, in context, line by line. Keep Jesus at the center. Strive for comprehension before interpretation. Give application ample time to emerge from a passage. Watch ignorance flee & transformation flourish as you study the Word well. Master it!

Something happens when we're willing to entrust our minds to the study of Scripture allowing God to move freely within us - our worship comes alive. Every one of us is prone to wander, and as a result, when we return, we'll find a newness in life if we let God speak to us through His Word. Since worship is volitional & rooted in a deep appreciation of Scripture.