

March 17, 2024

THE CENTRALITY OF GOD'S WORD IN WORSHIP

Nehemiah 7:4-10:39

*(7 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)*

In a sermon in March 1522, Luther extolled the glories of God's Word in the work of the Reformation, famously declaring, "I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

Now, in one sense, I don't think that's quite accurate. It's certainly not true that Luther did nothing. He made sure people had and knew the Scripture. He lectured through the Bible as a university professor for over thirty years, covering most of the books of the Bible in that time, and during one of those years he also preached 170 sermons.<sup>1</sup> He translated the Bible into German at a time when the Roman Catholic church simply read the Bible in Latin in public worship services, though the people could not understand what it said. And he studied the Bible so diligently that he would claim at one point, "I read the Bible over and over and over again, and was so perfectly acquainted with it, that I could, in an instant, have pointed to any verse that might have been mentioned."<sup>2</sup> Luther was by no means lazy when it came to knowing the Scriptures and making sure others knew them as well. He worked hard.

But his point still stands. There's simply no human equivalent to the power that the Word of God brings. It can bring life to those dead in their sins and reform and revitalize an entire congregation or community. This is what Luther was testifying to. As he sat back and examined all that had happened to transform his city, country, and the church through the work of the Reformation, he rightly claimed, "The Word did everything." It did what no man could have done.

But the Reformation wasn't exceptional in this way. It certainly isn't the only time in history we see the Word of God work miraculously to transform human hearts. First, we find this throughout the Scripture. We're told in 2 Timothy that Scripture is God's very Word, which is able to make us wise unto salvation, teach us, correct us, reprove us, and train us in righteousness. Then, in more modern church history, we can read of stories of revival, rooted in God's Word being proclaimed. But in some ways all of these moments of revival and reformation go back to an even earlier time when we might say the paradigm for reformation and revival was established in Nehemiah 7:4-10:39. It in these chapters that we see perhaps most clearly how the Bible can revive and reform the people of God.

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<sup>1</sup> E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 282.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Thomas Kerr, ed. *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger, 2010), 16.

Let me orient us to the setting a bit, and then I'll show you what I mean. As our text opens, we read in 7:4 that after the walls are completed and the city is fortified, there are actually very few people living in it. Apparently many of the builders of the wall went back to Persia, and others are living just outside of Jerusalem. So there's need to re-populate the city, which will be the focus of chapter 11. Meanwhile, Nehemiah spends chapter 7 republishing the list of people we saw back in Ezra 2. He tells us in 7:5 that he "found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first" and wrote it out again in this chapter. That may feel strange because, for us, it's only a few weeks since we saw that list in Ezra 2, but Nehemiah 7 is actually about 100 years later in time, and so this gives the people an opportunity to remember those who sacrificed and came before them so that they now have a city with the temple and walls surrounding Jerusalem rebuilt. Nehemiah 7 is a good reminder to us to remember those who came before us and were used by the Lord to carry out his purposes and plans—work that we benefit from to this day. But after reading that list of names in Nehemiah 7, we find that something interesting takes place in Nehemiah 8-10.

As chapter 8 opens, a group of Israelites gather in the town square, and they ask Ezra to bring the book of the law (that is, Genesis-Deuteronomy) and read it to them and teach them from it in 8:1. We soon find out an entire platform has been constructed for this moment. And so Ezra ascends the platform to read and teach, but he's not alone. We're told in 8:4 that he was surrounded by thirteen men—six on his right hand and seven on his left—who would assist him in reading the law. After all, it's a good bit to read Genesis through Deuteronomy in one sitting, and it could be that Ezra was as bad at pronouncing names as I am. But that's not all. We're also told in 8:7 that a group of thirteen Levites were down among the people, helping "the people to understand the Law." As a summary, we read, "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." And they did all of this for half the day—perhaps spending as many as six hours reading, explaining, and proclaiming the Word of God.

But what's crucial for us to see is that this act of reading, explaining, and proclaiming the Word of God—even just the first five books of the Bible—starts to have a transformative effect on the people. And this is what I think we're supposed to see in this section of Nehemiah—the powerfully transformative effect that Scripture has on the people of God. The reason this is important for us to see is because there's always a temptation to neglect the Word of God in our lives privately and to limit the centrality of the Word of God in our corporate worship. So, I hope that these chapters show us that we can't afford to do either. Therefore, I want to walk through the events of what happens under four different headings that show us what the Word of God is powerful to do in and for and people of God. So, first, the Word of God convicts.

### **The Word convicts**

As Ezra reads the law and the Levites help explain what's being read, we read in 8:9-10, "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.' 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. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Here’s what was going on. As the Scripture was read, the people realized commands in God’s Word that they had violated. And they were convicted, that is, their hearts were pierced, realizing that they had sinned. So they wept. Now, they were told not to mourn or weep because it was a time to rejoice. The reason for this is tied to the date. We’re told in 8:2 that this reading took place on the first day of the seventh month, and that meant it was time to celebrate the Feast of Booths. This particular festival was a multi-day festival to remember how the Lord had provided for the Israelites in the wilderness.

Remember, after they came out of Egypt, they wandered around in the wilderness for years before going into the promised land. During that time, their sandals didn’t wear out, the Lord provided them food and drink, and they dwelt in tents. Therefore, to commemorate the Lord’s provision during that time, they celebrated the Feast of Booths by constructing tent-like structures from tree branches and living in them for a week—just like they had in the wilderness. And because it was a time of celebration and remembering and giving thanks, it wasn’t fitting to be weeping and mourning. That would be like spending Thanksgiving day weeping and fasting. It’s a time to celebrate, feast, and give thanks. So that’s what they do, and the rest of chapter 8 tells us about how they did this for the first week of that seventh month.

But don’t miss why they were weeping. They were weeping and mourning because the Word had exposed their sin, which is clear in chapter 9 as they’ll gather to confess sin. The Word has convicted them of their sin. The term “conviction” is a term used to refer to this piercing revelation of sin that comes by God’s Word where we see our sin and guilt. Jesus used this Word to describe what the Spirit would do when he said in John 16:8, “And when [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” Therefore, when one hears the Word and his heart feels exposed and pierced because of his sin, we say that he’s experiencing conviction of sin. And nearly every revival that’s ever happened in history has started with the Word of God being proclaimed and people being convicted of sin, grieving over their sin, and wanting to turn from their sin.

This is precisely why we make it a regular practice, week-by-week, to read, explain, and proclaim the Word of God as we gather. We unapologetically make it central to our weekly gathering. The reason is because there’s nothing else that anchors us in holiness and brings conviction of sin. Let’s take every other element of our worship and examine it in contrast. We could baptize and come to the table, forgetting what they mean, continuing to drift toward sin. We could begin to sing songs that merely reflect the thoughts of what we *want* God to be like, drifting toward idolatry. We could pray prayers aimed at things that God does not prescribe, requesting things of God that dishonor him. And if all of those things happened, then we could gather and pray, sing, baptize, come to the table, and continue to drift further and further from the Lord and his commands and toward idolatry. We’ve seen it happen.

But, if we'll make our practice to read the Bible repeatedly as we gather and then seek to take time to explain it and proclaim it faithfully, then we have the greatest guardrail we could have against drifting from the ways and commands of the Lord. We have something that can continually convict us of our sin, even as we see happen in this text as the Word is read and explained, and they weep. This is why the Word must be central in worship and consistent in our lives. It convicts of sin. Second, the Word instructs.

## The Word instructs

So after that first day of hearing the Law of Moses read and explained, then being sent home to eat good food and drink good wine, the fathers from each home gathered back with Ezra on day two to study the words of the Law. Here's where they discover the Feast of Booths. We read in 8:14-15, "And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." And the people did so.

They'd been told that this was a time for celebration. That's why they'd been told to stop weeping. But they needed the Word of God to give them particular instruction on what they needed to do to obey God and celebrate this Feast of Booths. So they came back the next day to study in more detail. So we read in 8:17-18, "And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule."<sup>3</sup> They studied, were instructed by, and obeyed the Word of God, for the Word instructs.

This is another crucial reason why we must know God's Word and make it central in our worship. It instructs us. It not only convicts us when we've done wrong but it instructs us in what we should do. This is why we ask one of the pastors to give time to study the Word in depth each week so that as we gather on Sunday, we can give ourselves sufficient time to hear from it and understand it, so that we might obey it. Therefore, the sermon shouldn't be a passive time, where we merely sit back and wait it to end. We need to actively engage our ears, hearts, and minds, and allow ourselves to grow in knowing what God commands of us. If we fail in this and become ignorant of Scripture, we will become ignorant of areas where the Bible gives us clear

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<sup>3</sup> It can be a bit confusing to read that the feast of booths had not be celebrated "from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun." After all, at the beginning of Ezra it seems that they celebrated the feast. There are then at least two ways we can understand it. First, Nehemiah may be hyperbolic here, skipping over other celebrations of this feast in order to tie the people to those under Joshua. In this, he'd be making a connection between the people who came into the promised land and those (in his day) who were re-inhabiting it. A second possibility is that Nehemiah is saying that the feast had not been celebrated in this particular way (with careful attention to the commands of Scripture and with great rejoicing) since the days of Joshua.

instruction. So, let's take in and learn God's Word, seeing that it instructs us in how to live. Next, the Word tells us who God is.

### **The Word tells us who God is**

So, they heard the Word read for half the day on that first day of the month and were convicted. Then, they came back on day two, studied about the feast of booths, and were instructed in how they should celebrate the feast, continuing to hear the Word read each of these seven days. But after this time, they still wanted to address the issues they'd been convicted about from day one. So we're told in chapter 9 that they gathered on the twenty-fourth day of the month and "stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers" (9:1-2). They again read from the Word for a quarter of the day, and for another quarter of the day "they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God" (9:3).

We're given the content of their prayer of worship and confession in 9:6-37. As you read it, you'll see that it's a retelling of Israel's history with the Lord. In fact, it's the longest retelling of Israel's history that you'll find in the Bible. Just to break it down in manageable sections, in 6-8, they note that God created the heavens and the earth and called Abraham to himself, through which he'd bring about the nation of Israel. In verses 9-15, they speak of God delivering them from slavery in Egypt, giving them the law, and providing for them in the wilderness. In verses 16-21, they note that though God delivered them from Egypt, they still sinned against him in the wilderness, grumbling against him and even fashioning an idol of a golden calf. Then, in verses 22-25, they speak of God giving them the land under Joshua. Yet, in verses 26-31 they note that even then they were disobedient, rebelled against the Lord, killed the prophets, and committed blasphemies. They started a cycle (as recorded in the book of Judges) where they sinned, were oppressed, cried out to the Lord, were delivered, and then went right back to sinning. That's what had led to them being exiled to Babylon in the first place so that in order for them to rebuild the temple and the walls, they had to come back to Jerusalem and see what their sin had cost them.

This historical retelling of history was confession of sin. And it ends, acknowledging sin's consequences. They are still slaves. They declare, "Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves" (9:36). In other words, they may be back in Jerusalem, but they are under the rule of the king of Persia. They're paying his taxes, abiding by his rules, etc. They're slaves in a land God had given them to rule over, if only they hadn't rebelled. That's their prayer of confession.

But what their trek through biblical history also shows them is what God is like. Notice the themes of God's mercy and grace they see. At the end of verse 8, they note, "And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous." In the middle of verse 17, "But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them." Then, in verse 31, "Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God."

Their trek through biblical history reveals that God is righteous, keeps his promises, is merciful and gracious, and is forgiving. That's why they have the audacity to ask God to consider their current difficulty, saying, "Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us . . . since the times of the kings of Assyria to this day" (9:32). They're asking God to continue to show them mercy because their reflection on biblical history has highlighted the gracious and merciful nature of God.

This is what the Bible does for us as well. It shows us who our God is. And with the rest of the OT and the NT, we have more of God's Word than they did. We can see even more clearly what God is like. But without his Word, we simply wouldn't know. We would not know of Christ's life, death, and resurrection apart from God revealing it in his Word. Therefore, we make the Word central in our lives and in worship because God has made himself known to us, and we cannot know who he is apart from his Word. And if the greatest command is that we love him, then we must know him. Finally, the Word calls us to obey.

### **The Word calls us to obey**

After days of reading and hearing the Word of God taught and proclaimed, these Jews who'd returned to Jerusalem felt the pull on their hearts to obey God's Word. Therefore, in chapter 10 they make a covenant to obey the Lord. According to 10:29, they "enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes." They covenant to not intermarry with those who do not worship Israel's God, to care for and give to the house of God, and to honor the Sabbath. The Word has convicted them, instructed them, and shown them what God is like. And now they rightly respond by declaring their desire to obey. This desire comes from hearing the Word read, explained, and proclaimed.

Now, ultimately, we know that they don't keep this covenant. In fact, the purpose of the law was to show them that they couldn't keep it so that they'd look to Christ by faith and find righteousness in him alone. But on this side of Pentecost, things are different for us. One of the blessings of the New Covenant is that the Lord gives his people the ability to obey his Word. He gives us new hearts, puts his Spirit in us, and causes us to walk in his ways (Jer 31; Ezek 36). Therefore, our response to the Word must be, "I will obey." This is one reason why we don't shy away from covenanting together as a church to obey God's Word. Jesus explicitly says that those who love him keep his commandments. And in the Great Commission, he told us to make disciples by teaching them to obey all that he commands. The Word calls us to obey.

And this is why the Word must be central in our lives and worship. I'd love for Cornerstone to be a faithful congregation 100 years from now if the Lord tarries. But this will require that the Word remains central in our worship, being read, explained, and proclaimed. Let us then never depart from it, and may the Lord use it as a means to keep us a faithful people. At the Lord's return, may our faithfulness shine forth and we joyfully declare: "We did nothing; the Word did everything." Amen.