

**Nehemiah 8:1-10**  
**Today Is a Day of Rejoicing**  
**January 24, 2016**

This morning you're going to hear something you've heard less than 5 times in your life. In fact, it may be something that you have **never** heard in your life. You're going to hear a sermon text from the book of Nehemiah. As I've noted before, while our 3-year cycle of Scripture readings in worship (which, when the Psalms of the Day are included, consists of roughly 500 different readings) would seem to cover a sizable amount of the Bible, there are in fact wide swaths of the Bible that lie untouched. Yes, some entire **books** lie untouched. In fact, three consecutive books of the Old Testament are covered nowhere in the three-year cycle of readings that we have used for so many years. Those books are Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

The Supplement has suggested some alternate readings for the 3-year cycle. This supplemental lectionary contains two readings from Nehemiah. (It also contains one from Esther, while Ezra still gets shut out.)

This morning's sermon text is one of those readings from Nehemiah. But since Nehemiah is relatively unfamiliar to most of us, some background might be helpful. Around 930 B.C, King Solomon died and was succeeded by his son Rehoboam. Since Rehoboam's idea of an inauguration speech might be summed up as, "If you thought my father was tough on you, you haven't seen anything yet!" the ten northern tribes seceded, and the period of time known as the Divided Kingdom ensued. The Northern Kingdom was ruled by a steady stream of schnooks, resulting in God allowing those 10 tribes to be defeated and carried away by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., never to be heard from again.

The Southern Kingdom had more of a good king/bad king mix to their rulers, but eventually their ignoring of God's calls to repentance led God to allow them to be run over by the Babylonians around 600 B.C. It seemed as though the history of the nation of Israel had come to an end. But God's prophets had said that he would bring his people back from captivity, so once the Babylonians had served God's purposes, God raised up the Persians to defeat them, and in 536 B.C. King Cyrus of Persia permitted Zerubbabel to lead a group of Jews back to Judah and authorized them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. In 458 B.C. the priest Ezra led another group of Jews back to Judah.

He was followed 13 years later by a man named Nehemiah, who brought yet another group back to Israel. Nehemiah set about the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. In spite of opposition from without, from within, again from without, and finally from within and without at the same time, the wall was completed in 52 days. (!)

Having rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem to provide physical security for the people of Jerusalem, Nehemiah now set out to strengthen the nation's spiritual security, and he enlisted Ezra's help. We hear now the words of our text:

*All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.*

*So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.*

*Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.*

*Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.*

*The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Peliah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving people the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.*

*Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred 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.*

*Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (NIV)*

There may have been quite a sense of anticipation as the Jews gathered to hear Ezra read from the Book of the Law (note: "Book of the Law" is almost certainly a reference to the Pentateuch—that is, the 5 books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). It wasn't then like it is now. There wasn't a Bible—or even multiple Bibles—in each home. It's likely that public worship and proclamation of the Word had been somewhat sporadic during their time in exile. Much of the teaching of the Word had been done by word of mouth and was susceptible to people's forgetfulness and imperfect communication skills. But today they were going to be able to hear the Word—straight from God's mouth, as it were, through Ezra!

We gather that the sense of anticipation was matched by their commitment to hearing the Word. As we read that Ezra "*read it aloud from daybreak till noon*", we probably think at least one thing, and that ought to lead us to think another thing. We probably think, "from daybreak till noon—oof!" And the fact that we are silently pleased that church services and sermons don't last that long today ought to lead us to think and confess that at times our dedication and devotion to hearing the Word of God is not merely reflective of today's shortened attention spans, but perhaps also reflective of a lack of appreciation for—or what the explanation to the Second Commandment calls "despising"—the Word of God—that is, treating it as worth very little.

The people were clearly paying attention, because the hearing of the Word had an effect on them: they wept.

What had they heard that made them weep? They may have heard about the rebellion of Adam and Eve—and seen themselves in Adam and Eve. They may have heard God tell Adam that, as a result of his sin, "*dust you are and to dust you will return.*" (Genesis 3:19), they may have heard of God driving Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, banishing them from that paradise (Genesis 3:24), and they would have known that they too were going to die, that they too did not deserve to be allowed into paradise. Although we're 2500 years removed from Ezra and his listeners, we know that we too have sinned, that we too will die, and that we too do not deserve to be allowed into Heaven.

They may have heard of Cain's murder of his brother Abel. They may have heard of the utter wickedness of the earth at Noah's time, and that "*the Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth*" (Genesis 6:6), and how that led him to say, "*I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth*" (Genesis 6:7). They may have shuddered at the awesome power of God as he destroyed the world with a flood.

From daybreak till noon, they continually heard about the sins of men they would have considered to be far better than they—sins that they themselves had committed. They would have heard about the drunkenness of Noah, the adultery of Abraham, the lying of Isaac, the scheming of Jacob, the hatred of Joseph's brothers.

They would have heard about the absolute recalcitrance of their forefathers—even after God had miraculously rescued them from Pharaoh and was bringing them to the land he had promised them. More ominously, they would have heard of how God dealt with those who dared to grumble against him. They would have heard of the fire that “*consumed some of the outskirts*” (Numbers 11:1) of their camp, the quail which God sent them in response to their grumbling about the monotony of manna that God miraculously sent them each day—quail which they then died from eating (Numbers 11:4-6, 18-20, 31-34). They would have heard about the venomous snakes that God sent among them, killing them as they boldly grumbled against God and against his chosen leader, Moses. (Numbers 21:4-6). They would have heard about the refusal to trust God's promises that he would give them the land of Canaan, even though the people seemed so formidable, and they would have heard about how God first struck down the spies who had convinced the people to not trust God's promises, and then how God promised that none of the adults of that time would ever enter the Promised Land. (Numbers 13:36-14:45)

They would have heard how, when it was finally time to enter the Promised Land, Moses carefully and thoroughly warned them about abandoning the Lord their God and failing to “*carefully follow all his commands and decrees*” (Deuteronomy 28:15). They would have recoiled at the lengthy list of curses that Moses promised would result from such disobedience—and they would have seen just how those curses had come upon their forefathers.

And they would have known that they had been no better. No wonder they were weeping—for what they had been, and for what was sure to come!

It appears that the people had done a good job of listening to the Book of the Law—or at least they had done a good job of listening to the portions of it that convicted them of their sin and guilt and made them realize the chasm that existed between them as they were by nature and a holy God as he was by nature.

May we do a similarly humble job of hearing God's law, of recognizing our sins and our guilt, and having sorrow over them. That's a God-worked and a godly weeping and mourning.

But may we also hear **all** of what is contained in the Bible. Ezra's listeners hadn't done that. There was so much that they (apparently) hadn't heard with their hearts. They hadn't heard that same God in the Garden of Eden telling Satan that he was going to send someone to crush his head, to reverse the death that had resulted from Adam's sin. (Genesis 3:15) They hadn't seen the significance of, the graciousness in God's sparing of Cain's life and even going so far as to put his mark on Cain in order to protect him. (Genesis 4:13-15) The fact that that God “remembered Noah” (Genesis 8:1), graciously saving him from the flood—not because Noah was a sinless man, but because he trusted in God and in his promise of a Messiah—that fact seemed to have swept right past their ears.

So much good news in the Law of Moses! God coming to sinful Abraham and promising to not only make him a great nation but also to bless all nations through one of his offspring—the Savior of the world—and then, when Abraham believed God's promises, God “*credited it to him as righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6).

How God saved Joseph's brothers in spite of their hatred of Joseph, and how he even was able to use what they had intended for evil to be used for their good (Genesis 50:20), elevating Joseph to a position in Egypt by which he was able to save his brother's lives from the famine—an act which also preserved the line of that promised Savior.

The fire on the outskirts of the camp—it stayed on the outskirts of the camp rather than consuming the center of the camp—**and** the fire died out when Moses interceded with God on their behalf. (Numbers 11:2) The poison of the snakes was nullified by a faith-filled gaze at a bronze serpent. (Numbers 21:7-9) And despite his people's unfaithfulness, God was faithful to his promise and brought the Israelites into the Promised Land. Even now he had preserved a remnant and brought them out of Babylon back to Israel.

So much good news—that is, so much “gospel”—in the Law of Moses! So much reason for joy! So much reason to enjoy choice food and sweet drinks! So much reason to rejoice at the strength of the Lord who had preserved them from their enemies and even saved them from their sins!

That's why Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites stopped the people in mid-cry with the words, *“This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep...Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks...Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

May we never lose sight of that. Satan wants us to lose sight of it. If he can't get us to ignore our sin and guilt, he wants us to weep endlessly over it, never opening our ears to hear the good news of a Savior who has taken the poison of our sin into himself, never lifting our heads for a faith-filled gazing at the cross.

So much gospel in our worship services! Don't miss it. Don't gloss over it because you're too busy putting on your hair-shirt in an attempt to sufficiently impress God or yourself.

Yes, there is indeed, as Ecclesiastes says, *“a time to weep...a time to mourn.”* (Ecclesiastes 3:4) We do that very early on in the worship service when we confess our sins and our guilt before God, along with our absolute inability to do anything to change it.

But that time of mourning doesn't last very long. It's quickly destroyed by the gospel—the gospel that dominates our worship. If you've been paying close attention to this morning's order of service, you'll see that it's everywhere: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.” “God, our heavenly Father, has forgiven all your sins. By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has removed your guilt forever. You are his own dear child.” “In the peace of forgiveness...” “The Lord is good. Blessed are they who take refuge in him.” “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” In the psalm, *“Redeemer.”* (Psalm 19:14) In the gospel reading, *“He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19) “I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” “Our **Father** in heaven...” The benediction.

And then there are the visuals—the cross on which Jesus paid for our sins, the baptismal font at which God made us one of his chosen people and washed our sins away, the words and pictures on the banners.

And in many of our worship services we even get to receive the absolute choicest of foods and sweetest of drinks, receiving the body and blood of Jesus our Savior as one more joyful assurance that for the Christian, even this life on earth may be, as Ecclesiastes says, *“a time to laugh...and a time to dance”* (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

The verses following our text tell us that the Jews took Ezra and Nehemiah's command both to the head and the heart: *“Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.”* (Nehemiah 9:12)

You have heard and understood the words of God. May God the Holy Spirit continue to grant you understanding, that you may see every day as a day for rejoicing in the strength and goodness of the Lord. Amen.