

SERMON TEXT: **NEHEMIAH 8**

COMPANION STUDY TEXT: **PSALM 119:9-16; 25-32**

Opening Question

- How has your choice to engage in joyful worship and hearing the word of God been instrumental in restoring or renewing your faith in the past?

Purpose of This Week's Study

To help us establish or re-establish regular patterns of individual and corporate reading of Scripture, in order both to strengthen our spiritual lives and to promote our overall well-being and engagement with people beyond the church.

INTRODUCTION TO THIS WEEK'S STUDY

In chapter 8 of the Book of Nehemiah, Ezra and Nehemiah are named as contemporaries. As worship leader, Ezra reads the law of God to the people. Nehemiah is described as the governor, and at this time served in both a political and an "ecclesial" capacity.

Placing these two central activities – worship and governance – in alignment to each another reminds us that there is a relationship between the governance of God's people and the worship of God, where the common thread between them is the word of God.

Through the regular reading of the law of God, God's people are reminded that God is above them in their role both as worshipers, and as citizens of both God's new kingdom and the state.

The emphasis in chapter 8 is on the people's eagerness to hear the word of God, to have it explained, and to worship the Lord in response. The people call on Ezra to read and to interpret the word and to help them apply it to their own lives. A wooden platform is built (v4), on which Ezra stands to read the word aloud as both a visual and audible reminder that the entire community is under God's authority. The phrase "all the people" is used again and again to emphasize the unity of God's people as they submit to God, as they listen to his word, and as they worship God in response. The restored people of God will not be a people where everyone does what is right in their own eyes as they did during the time of the judges (Judges 17:6), when they embraced a highly individualistic approach to life, and made decisions centered solely upon their own will and desire. Instead, God's word establishes a shared rule of life to be lived out in close community with others.

Emphasized in chapter 8 is the concern that all the people not only hear, but also understand God's word. The people respond – body and soul – in worship. Hearing God's word results in repentance and joy. From that experience, the people are also moved to a sense of mission. They are urged to reach out to neighbours by sharing what they have with those who are poor. For to be in committed relationship with God is to be in committed relationship with one another and even with those beyond our immediate community.

Relatedly, at the center of the Book of Psalms is the theme that "the Lord reigns." Under God's reign, we thrive as humans. Psalm 119 (along with Psalm 1 and Psalm 19, and others) confronts our modern bias that sees commands as restricting our lives. Instead, the verses from this psalm liberate us and give us space in which to be fully human, fully whom God designed us to be.

Indeed, the word of God continually grounds us in our identity as beloved sons and daughters and calls us to our vocation as partners with God in healing the world through the Good News of the kingdom.

God’s word is therefore our starting point from which we engage in our ongoing pursuit of God each day. In view of the brevity of his life, as “a sojourner on earth,” the writer of this psalm longs to make the most of his situation by studying God’s word as a source of strength amid uncertainty, anxiety, and suffering.

Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 8

V	NIV	MSG
7:73	The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the temple servants, along with certain of the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns,	By the time the seventh month arrived, the People of Israel were settled in their towns. Then all the people gathered as one person in the town square in front of the Water Gate and asked the scholar Ezra to bring the Book of The Revelation of Moses that God had commanded for Israel.
1	all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.	
2	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.	So Ezra the priest brought The Revelation to the congregation, which was made up of both men and women—everyone capable of understanding. It was the first day of the seventh month. He read it facing the town square at the Water Gate from early dawn until noon in the hearing of the men and women, all who could understand it. And all the people listened—they were all ears—to the Book of The Revelation.
3	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.	
4	Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaijah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.	The scholar Ezra stood on a wooden platform constructed for the occasion. He was flanked on the right by Mattithiah, Shema, Anaijah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, and on the left by Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam.
5	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 opened the book. Every eye was on him (he was standing on the raised platform) and as he opened the book everyone stood. Then Ezra praised God, the great God, and all the people responded, “Oh Yes! Yes!” with hands raised high. And then they fell to their knees in worship of God, their faces to the ground.
6	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.	
7	The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.	Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, all Levites, explained The Revelation while people stood, listening respectfully. They translated the Book of The Revelation of God so the people could understand it and then explained the reading.
8	They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear[a] and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.	
9	Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and 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.	Nehemiah the governor, along with Ezra the priest and scholar and the Levites who were teaching the people, said to all the people, “This day is holy to God, your God. Don’t weep and carry on.” They said this because all the people were weeping as they heard the words of The Revelation.
10	Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and 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.”	He continued, “Go home and prepare a feast, holiday food and drink; and share it with those who don’t have anything: This day is holy to God. Don’t feel bad. The joy of God is your strength!”
11	The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”	The Levites calmed the people, “Quiet now. This is a holy day. Don’t be upset.”
12	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.	So the people went off to feast, eating and drinking and including the poor in a great celebration. Now they got it; they understood the reading that had been given to them.
13	13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law.	On the second day of the month the family heads of all the people, the priests, and the Levites gathered around Ezra the scholar to get a deeper understanding of the words of The Revelation. They found written in The Revelation that God commanded through Moses that the People of Israel are to live in booths during the festival of the seventh month. So they published this decree and had it posted in all their cities and in Jerusalem: “Go into the hills and collect olive
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 and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.	branches, pine branches, myrtle branches, palm branches, and any other leafy branches to make booths, as it is written.”
16	So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim.	So the people went out, brought in branches, and made themselves booths on their roofs, courtyards, the courtyards of The Temple of God, the Water Gate plaza, and the Ephraim Gate plaza. The entire congregation that had come back from exile made booths and lived in them.
17	The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and 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.	The People of Israel hadn’t done this from the time of Joshua son of Nun until that very day—a terrific day! Great joy!
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.	Ezra read from the Book of The Revelation of God each day, from the first to the last day—they celebrated the feast for seven days. On the eighth day they held a solemn assembly in accordance with the decree.

PSALM 119:9-16; 25-32

V	NIV	MSG
9	How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.	How can young people keep their lives pure? By obeying your commands.
10	I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.	With all my heart I try to serve you; keep me from disobeying your commandments.
11	I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.	I keep your law in my heart, so that I will not sin against you.
12	Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees.	I praise you, O Lord; teach me your ways.
13	With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.	I will repeat aloud all the laws you have given.
14	I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.	I delight in following your commands more than in having great wealth.
15	I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.	I study your instructions; I examine your teachings.
16	I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.	I take pleasure in your laws; your commands I will not forget.
25	I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.	I lie defeated in the dust; revive me, as you have promised.
26	I gave an account of my ways and you answered me; teach me your decrees.	I confessed all I have done, and you answered me; teach me your ways.
27	Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.	Help me to understand your laws, and I will meditate on your wonderful teachings.
28	My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.	I am overcome by sorrow; strengthen me, as you have promised
29	Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me and teach me your law.	Keep me from going the wrong way, and in your goodness teach me your law.
30	I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have set my heart on your laws.	I have chosen to be obedient; I have paid attention to your judgments.
31	I hold fast to your statutes, Lord; do not let me be put to shame.	I have followed your instructions, Lord; don't let me be put to shame.
32	I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding.	I will eagerly obey your commands, because you will give me more understanding.

For Reflection & Discussion

Focus on **Nehemiah 8**

- Based on **Nehemiah 8:1-8**, what are some important things you see about teaching and studying God’s Word?
- What significance might there be to this taking place at the Watergate?
 - What is the significance of water in the Bible?
 - What are some key passages about water?
- Why had the people been weeping?
 - What does this show about the attitude of the people?
- Why did their leaders tell them not to weep?
 - What should they do instead of weeping?
 - How does the phrase “*the joy of the Lord is your strength*” connect to the whole passage?
 - What role did the Levites have in the teaching
 - Why were the people so happy in **verse 12**?
 - Why did Nehemiah and Levites encourage the people to celebrate with food and drink and to share with others?
- How do you respond to Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levite’s instruction to not weep or mourn or cry but to feast and rejoice?
 - What other direction is given to the people about how they are to feast?
- There are several feasts or festivals in the Torah (the first 5 books of Moses) * major feasts
 - * The **Feast of Passover (*Pesach*)** celebrated the night when the angel passed over the Hebrew households in Egypt.
 - The **Feast of Unleavened Bread** commemorated the first 7 days of the Exodus when the Hebrews left Egypt in such a hurry that they did not have time to add yeast to their dough.
 - * The **Feast of Weeks** also called **Pentecost (*Shavuot*)**. It marked the end of the harvest and offering of first fruits.
 - The **Feast of Trumpets (*Yom Teruah*)** the blowing of a ram's horn, or shofar, to call the people to prepare for the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). This became the Jewish New Year (***Rosh Hashanah***).
 - The **Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)** the most solemn day of the year. On this day, the High Priest sacrificed sin offerings to atone all the sins of the people and entered the Most Holy Place to offer incense.
 - * The **Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*)** celebrated the completion of the great fall harvest and remembered the Hebrews in the Exodus living in tents for 40 years.
 - The **Feast of the Last Great Day (*Shmini Atzeret*)** marked the conclusion of the festival year.
- Should Christians celebrate these festivals like the Jews did?
 - If so, what should the focus of these celebrations be?

Focus on **Psalm 119:9-16**.

- What practical steps have you taken, or can you take, to pattern your life after God's word?
- What attitude is a hallmark of following God's law?
- What does this say about the writer's perception of God's law?

Now focus on **Psalm 119:25-32**.

- Are those who follow God's word exempt from stress? Depression? Difficulty?
- What does suffering motivate the psalmist to do?
- What does suffering motivate you to do?
- Is God willing to hear the writer's list of troubles?
- What is your attitude toward those around you who suffer and who are experiencing difficulty, whatever the cause?
- What three things does the writer ask God to supply (**vv. 27-29**)?
- How has the psalmist prepared himself to receive God's help?

For Prayer Ministry

It is good to include a time of quiet waiting before God in our prayer time. It is also good to provide for a time of response in prayer, and/or for praying over one another.

The first part of the group's prayer together is guided by several verses of Scripture. These verses are included to practice opening our hearts to the word of God and allowing the words of Scripture to shape our initial time of prayer.

- Begin this prayer time with 1-2 minutes of silence.
- Break the silence by reading **John 6:44**.
"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him."
 - Spend a few minutes listening for the invitation of the Father to this time of prayer.
- Read **John 16:8**.
"... and when He has come, He will convict the world of sin and of righteousness, and of judgement."
 - Take a few moments to reflect on where God has convicted you of sin, righteousness and judgement this past week.
- Read **1 John 1:8-9**.
"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."
 - Take a few moments to notice any place in your life where you have walked away from God's commands and laws.
 As the Holy Spirit convicts you of any attitude or action, confess it before God.
 Then receive the forgiveness of God.
- Read **Ezekiel 36:26**.
"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."
 - Open your hands before God and receive the refreshment of his Holy Spirit.
- Read **James 1:22**.
"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."
 - Now wait on the Lord and seek to understand how God's Spirit wants to use you as a blessing to others in your group and beyond as you wait for prophetic words and words of healing, and as you offer prayers for one another.

For Further Reflection & Action Outside of Group

- The Holy Spirit through the Scriptures enables us to become not simply a "rebuilt" people, but a new creation, and a community who welcomes others in.
 - In the season ahead, who might you invite into your group or circle of friends that feels excluded for one reason or another – perhaps because of a disability, or their race, or their gender, or their age, or for some other reason?
- Choose a short book of Scripture, or several chapters of a longer book of Scripture, to read aloud this week, perhaps multiple times.
 - As you read sections of Scripture aloud, what do you notice about God, yourself, other people, and the world?
 - Take even a few minutes to record your observations and reflections in a journal.
- How will you bear witness to your relationship with God and his word in the week ahead?