

IX. Nehemiah in Biblical Perspective  
*The Memoirs of Nehemiah—Arise and Build*  
“People of the Book”  
Nehemiah 8  
Dr. Harry Reeder  
October 16, 2011 – Morning Sermon

We are in Nehemiah 8 but I want to read a few verses before we get to Nehemiah 8 which will bring us to the conclusion and the fifty two days of the building of the wall. Nehemiah 6:15-16 says **15** *So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.* Now Nehemiah 7 which will give us some pertinent information for Nehemiah 8. Nehemiah 7:73 says **73** *So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their towns. And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns.* Now let’s look at Nehemiah 8. I’ll read part at this time and later we’ll look at all of it.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 says **1** *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. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law (the Pentateuch) before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 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. 4 And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 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. 6 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. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. 8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 9 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. 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. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” 12 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.*  
The grass withers, the flower fades, by God’s grace may His Word be preached to you.

I had really wrestled with how to start this and here is why. I believe the key to understanding the Reformation and the Great Awakening and that which is needed for this day within a country that is now in a cultural and spiritual death spiral, Nehemiah is one of the most important books in all the Bible to understand. I believe our country is in great need of a Gospel Awakening. It's our only hope. I want the Gospel to go to every nation in all the world but I also want it to go to the nation in which I reside. We have a desperate need and I believe that need can only be met by the Gospel. It's not necessarily going to be configured with changed laws although I'm glad for good laws, better leadership although I'm always glad for good leadership, good business practices although I certainly want good business practices, better television programs although I certainly want that. I do not believe we will have a Gospel Awakening until the church is revived.

I believe when the church is revived you absolutely know it. When God sends His Spirit for times of refreshing upon the people of God there is always an unmistakable reality. This has been a wonderful time, right? We are now up to Nehemiah 8. Here is Nehemiah in prayer, he goes and in fifty two days they have the wall built. The coming generation of leaders are in place. The people are identified, their location and their genealogy. Everything is in place and what is happening out there? They have overcome the adversaries and the seven tactics of adversity that were brought against them, but what is out there? The enemies of God are out there. What are the enemies of God doing? That is why I read the passage in Nehemiah 6 at the beginning. The enemies of God have seen what He has done and they said it couldn't be done. God has done it and they know God has done it so they are all seeking for counselors. They fell in their self esteem and they are all looking for some therapy right now and they are trembling in fear because the hand of God was there. Now that's what happened to the enemies of God when God's marvelous reviving work came upon the people.

What's happening to the people of God when God sovereignly, graciously, powerfully moves in their life, fulfilling all of His promises, sending the leaders that He has raised up for them? You do realize the purposes of God are that the people of God would rejoice in giving glory to God. Whenever God acts or moves it's for the purpose of raising up worshippers to the glory of God. When God moved in creation why did God make us? God made us for His own glory. When God moved to send His Son to save us at the cross, why did He do that? In Ephesians 1 three times it tells you that He saves us to the praise and glory of His grace. When God upholds us in His kind providence day by day and causes all things to work together in a broken world, why does He do that? It is so His people might confidently life up glory to Him. So God has come and He has rebuilt the wall. The people need to be rebuilt.

What will the people do now that God has moved? He has sent Ezra, Nehemiah, Joshua, Zechariah, Haggai and all of these leaders and He has fulfilled all of the promises He gave to Isaiah and Jeremiah that He would do for them coming out of the Babylonian exile and now He has given them the temple, altar and city of God, built walls around the city of God, now what will the people of God do? Very likely at the top of the temple area there was very likely a place that was the pinnacle of the temple and on the seventh month Elul which was the month of the atonement also contained two feasts that are identified in Leviticus and Numbers. On the first day of the month someone would stand

and blow a trumpet for the first day was the feast of the Trumpets. When that trumpet blew the people were ready.

They gathered at the Water Gate for the worship service. One might think, “Why didn’t they go to the temple for this worship service?” It was because this worship service extended to men and women. If they had gone to the temple it would have only been men attending. The children who could not understand were not there perhaps they had a children’s worship service going on for them. The Water Gate at that time in the lay of the land would have had a slope to it. There at the square they had raised up a big platform that was called in the Hebrew a tower that is translated platform and in some places pulpit. It actually means a tower because it was so large. Ezra mounted up upon it and Nehemiah and the leadership were there. There were seven on one side and six on the other. The people stood as the Pentateuch was opened, the Law was read, and they were worshipping and hearing the Word of God for six hours. Amen? They were there from the early morning until the midday.

As Ezra would read from the Law, he would then preach from it and then the Levites would move among the people and teach them what they had just heard. My guess is they would repeat this process where Ezra would read another text, preach from it and then the Levites would pull small groups around them and teach them what they had just heard. Perhaps they would field questions, talk about its implications and they would continue on. When the books were opened and the Bible was read it said they mourned and they wept. Then Nehemiah, Ezra and all the leaders came to them and told them not to weep for this is a day of rejoicing, a holy day unto the Lord and this is the time you thank God that He who is faithful has rescued you and fulfilled His promises. They knew why they were weeping but it was a day to eat the fat and drink the sweet wine sharing it with all that are around you for this is a festival day of praise to God who has fulfilled His Word.

I believe this is crucial. I want to back up to the Gospel Awakening and the revived church. How do you know when there is a revived church? This is a pivotal moment. At the pivotal moment the unimpeachable evidence of God sent revival is the ascendancy of God centered, life changing worship. How do you know when God is reviving His people? The ascendancy of God centered, life changing worship becomes the pinnacle of the very existence of God’s people. God is doing a work in His people and when He built this wall, overcame the adversaries, the hand of God was there and the enemies of God were trembling in fear but the people of God rose up as one man to give praise to God from whom all blessings flow. When God moves in the life of an individual or a congregation the next thing that happens is the rejoicing of the privilege and embracing of the opportunity of the assembled, God centered worship in which life is transformed.

If God centered worship is the unimpeachable evidence of heaven sent revival and you can see this in Acts 2? They began to praise God in the temple and met house to house. In Acts 4 5,000 more are added in one day. They are praising God meeting house to house. In the Reformation they praised God and began to study the Word of God together. In the Great Awakening you hear Benjamin Franklin’s assessment when he said, “It looked like the whole world was going to church. Everybody was worshipping all the time.” Whenever God moves through the fresh winds of the Spirit of God in the heart of a man, woman, family or congregation, the first thing that happens but not the

only thing is the ascendancy of God centered worship in the hearts and lives of God's people. It becomes life changing.

What does that worship look like? From this text I want to give you seven observations of how God centered worship is marked out. The first one is God centered worship is marked out by unity. From the text it says they gathered as one man. They didn't say for the older ones to go over there and worship and the younger ones over here or those who like the songs of Moses go here and those who want the songs of Asaph go over there. They didn't do apartheid worship where everyone divided up based upon personal preference. It wasn't about them. It was about God and with the opening of God's Word, the hearing of God's Word, God's people gathered as one man with one thought – Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Whenever that Word was proclaimed it ended with Amen and Amen. That's what Paul is pointing us to in the New Testament when he says "When we gather in worship in one accord, with one heart, one voice, one mind, one soul and one purpose, let everything and everyone that has breath, praise the Lord."

The second one is God centered worship is marked by the prominence of leaders in worship. It's no accident in the text that when they come to worship there is this large tower and on one side sits seven leaders and on the other side sits six leaders. Now why it is thirteen leaders I don't have the slightest idea. I have tried greatly to come up with some insight here to tell you why it's thirteen and I really wanted it to be wrong so that there were only twelve but it wasn't. When the people came to worship they didn't have to hunt for the leadership because there they were. Leaders didn't just call and approve worship services, they modeled it. It was their priority. This is so challenging to me as a leader. If worship is the only thing that God says He seeks and it's the pinnacle of God's redeeming and reviving work then shouldn't leadership mean that I not only make room for it in the calendar of the church but I make room for it in my life as a leader to set the pace for God's people.

If you would have been living about a hundred years ago in the Presbyterian Church they would have figured this out in a way to do it structurally. In fact, my favorite church building other than Briarwood, is in Savannah, Georgia called Independent Presbyterian Church. There they have a high pulpit that is twelve feet high. I just don't know how that would fit here but just to be twelve feet above contradiction every time you preach would be a marvelous privilege. You can see the pillars and the congregation is arrayed around it. Then under the pillars are the chairs for the elders. They sit there looking at the congregation supporting the Word of God and modeling worship for God's people.

I actually had the experience in of all places Mandeville, Jamaica. The name of the church was Riverside Presbyterian Church. It's been a couple of years since I have been there but I went there to preach. They sat me down and when the time came for the sermon one of the elders who were sitting underneath the pulpit with white gloves on came and led me around the back of the pulpit and opened the door. We climbed the steps to the top of the high pulpit and he brought me to where the Bible was. He opened the Bible, declared the preaching of the Word and then he turned around and left. To this day I can still hear that door locking right behind me when he left that pulpit. I preached and when I finished I turned around and there he was. He led me back down and sat me back down. Then he called for the elders who were sitting underneath the pulpit and one

by one they would stand up and call on people in the congregation for the points of the sermon and testimony as to how they desired to live what they heard in their life. Wow! There is leadership prominent in worship.

I'll never forget the time in 1999 when I had the privilege to meet with a couple of hundred leaders from this congregation and we talked about the legacy of prayer and the Word needed to be affirmed and built upon as we moved into the future. I said I'd like to help do this with the morning and evening sacrifices of praise and I wanted to incorporate a Sunday evening worship. I asked if the elders and deacons would be supportive of it. I know what it meant to me after those coming months when I would see 150 to 200 elders and their families supporting the worship of the Lord. Leaders don't hide in worship, they lead in worship and they lead from the front, not to put on a display about themselves but we set the pace for others in terms of the priority of worship and in terms of the manner of worship. They watch us.

Thirdly, God centered worship is marked by the primacy of God's Word and the prevalence of prayer. They opened the Word, the people stood and the Word was the center point. They were people of the Book. God centered worship has the Word of God there because we don't know who God is to worship without the Word of God. We don't know how to worship without the Word of God because we're supposed to worship in Spirit and in truth. The Bible says Thy Word is truth. Worship isn't done by vain imagination or intuition. We go to God's Word. What does God's Word say to do in worship? So God's Word defines worship. It defines our life, how we are supposed to live. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and training that the man of God maybe adequate and equipped for every good work, from worship to witness to everything in life to my family to my business. I need to know the Word of God therefore at the pinnacle of God's saving, reviving work will always be God centered worship and God centered worship revolves around the prevalence of prayer as we call upon Him and the primacy of God's Word. God's Word is read, sung, prayed, preached, given sense to and God's Word is explained so that the people can understand it and lead with the joy of the Lord as their strength.

Fourthly, God centered worship is marked by the faithful preaching and hearing of God's Word. These are not passive listeners, are they? They are listening and they weep. They hear the Word of God and they are asking questions. The Levites are answering out there in their midst. They are seeking to understand. In fact it says they went away rejoicing because they understood. They weren't passive. They were engaged in the hearing of the Word. There is the faithful preaching of the Word. There is the faithful hearing of the Word. Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ so here is the primacy of preaching. As you would have approached the 16th century churches you would have seen the Table of the Lord high and lifted up as it was the center point of the architecture of the church. After the Reformation you would find the Table of the Lord down on the ground so people could have access to it as the priesthood of all believers and now lifted up was the pulpit because of the primacy of the Word and preaching. Paul said, "God did not send me to baptize, He sent me to preach the Word which through the foolishness of the message preached that we are being saved." There is the Word, the Message, and it was designed to be preached. God has given that Word to be preached and God's people when they assemble for God centered worship call for the faithful

preaching of the Word and actively engage in it with their very lives that they are actively hearing it and responding to it.

Let me tell you how active it is. I think this is the way it was being done. Ezra would read and then preach. Then the Levites would move out and get people in small groups and they would start explaining it. People would start asking them questions. These people are absolutely engaged. There is not only the preaching of God's Word but there is a desire to understand and move into the life of the Word. There is a hunger for God's Word preached. As a minister of the Gospel, it is not the emotional exuberance of a new convert that gives me confidence that they are a believer. It is the expressed, attended hunger for the Word of God to be read and preached. That's when I have assurance that this is a work of God in someone's life. I think the same thing is true as a church. A church which hungers for the primacy of the Word, the prevalence of prayer, the calling for, expecting for, praying for the faithful preaching of the Word and actively, prioritized engagement in the hearing of the Word is a church that's moving. I don't care if they have 100 or 5,000 members but I believe that is where the Lord is moving.

The fifth mark is God centered worship is marked by both reverence and joy. They had gotten carried away in their emotions and didn't deny their emotions. The leaders told them to calm down for this was unto the Lord. So there is both reverence and joy that is taking place in worship. There is the decorum of reverence where we are before God worshipping Him but that reverence is not morbidity. They are rejoicing. There is gladness in their heart and life but their gladness doesn't lead to the trivializing of worship. Somehow both of those things are woven together and we don't do that today. We want to have a good time in worship so it becomes a three ring circus and it just depends on who is up front who can pep up everybody or we say we're going to have a reverent worship and you think you have just walked into the viewing room of body in a morgue somewhere.

When the Spirit of God comes there is both reverence and decorum and there is rejoicing. Only the Spirit of God can pull this off. No worship leader can pull that off. If there is not a sense of reverence in worship I will assure us that there won't be a sense of reverence in the way that we live our life before Christ. I believe the thermostat for life for Christ is set in worship that is done for Christ and it ought to be marked by joy and reverence both at the same time. That's the way it was done in Nehemiah 8.

The six one is God centered worship is marked by leadership preparation and congregational participation. That worship service didn't just happen. "Okay this is a revival so I guess that tower is just kind of going to appear." Somebody built that tower and someone planned to have it at the Water Gate. Which leaders are supposed to be up here? We haven't really heard about Ezra since Ezra 7 but he has been here all along. What has he been doing? For thirteen years we were told in Ezra 7:10 that Ezra set his heart to study the Word of God, to do it and to teach it. Now Ezra you have been preparing, come here. We have a six hour sermon we need. They put the Levites out so that they could answer the questions of the people. They identified those who could do teaching. There is leadership preparation. It is all over the place. It doesn't just happen.

There is also congregational participation. When they started to worship everyone was there. They were already there as 'one man'. I don't know how they got ready and I don't know how it got out to everybody. Where did everyone start out? They were out in their towns, so how did they get there? They did not have Facebook.

They couldn't twitter or tweet. They couldn't do any of those things. They couldn't make pamphlets or flyers because they didn't have printing presses but somehow the leaders got the word to everyone so when the trumpet sounded everyone was there as 'one man' on that first day of the month. As the trumpet sounded and they were all there they then participated in the worship. They participated verbally when they said "Amen, Amen." They participated visually for when appropriate or they so desired they would raise their hands. There was a full engagement. Worship wasn't an event that they attended, it was an act that they did. They engaged in the worship and praise of God. So that reverence and joy found appropriate and proper expression yet it was clearly expressed.

Finally, the seventh one is God centered worship is marked by mourning over sin and rejoicing over grace. Why are they weeping? It has been over 200 years since this has happened and now the Book is opened. These are the same whose forbearers when Isaiah and Jeremiah would preach the Word, they didn't have time for them and God took them into judgment and disciplined them. Now God has brought them home and they realize their sins – their faithlessness, their unfaithfulness – and they are mourning over their sins. They have been engaged in the Word. Dare I jump into this century? You wouldn't have to say to these people "Turn off your electronic devices." They had no distractions. Probably while I'm speaking now people are texting even at this moment. They had absolute fidelity, fascination and attachment.

They loved the Word of God. When the Word showed them their sins they mourned. We haven't had the Word because of our unfaithfulness. Then they came and said "Rejoice over God's grace." We've been faithless, He's been faithful. He raised up Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, Joshua and He did all of these things. He has fulfilled His promises. He has brought us home. See the temple, the altar, the sacrifice, the city, the walls, the enemies of God trembling for God has been faithful so don't weep but rejoice for the Lord your God has won the victory and He has brought you back to the city of God for the glory of God. It was that moment that had come upon them.

Whenever there is God centered worship that's life changing there is something else that is always accompanying it. That is small group disciple making. Small group disciple making is the ever present partner to God centered worship when the Lord brings revival. Let's look in Nehemiah 8 and the second day of the month. Nehemiah 8:13-18 says **13** *On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.* (They had a small group Bible study the next day.) **14** *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, 15 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."* **16** *So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. 17 And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the 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. 18 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.*

As they are studying the Bible they found out there was another feast and no one had done this since the day Joshua left, hundreds of years ago. It was the feast of Booths. By the way, it was the feast of Booths that gave rise to the Methodist church. Have you heard of the camp meetings? They would build these camps and go stay for weeks for meetings. That's what this was for. These people look at it and realize this was in Leviticus and Numbers and that they were supposed to be doing this feast of Booths. There was not only the Feast of Trumpets on the first day but on the fifteenth day they are supposed to have the Feast of Booths. So they confessed their sin and took from the second day all the way to the fifteenth day to celebrate the Feast of Booths. I can just see the kids saying "We get to camp out, isn't this great?" They all get together and remember that God brought them out of Israel. God has given them this living history lesson that they are to do and they come together to do it for seven days.

On the eighth day they come to a worship service and on that day you won't believe what happened. What happened? I'll tell you in our next study of Nehemiah 9. It is unbelievable to see what happened next but they gathered in this protracted meeting when they received the Word. That's what small group discipleship does. The marks of small group discipleship are teaching, learning, discovery and changed lives. Wow, I hadn't seen that before. How could I forget this? They discovered it, then repentance and then their lives were changed. Small group disciple making is the partner with large group God centered life changing worship.

I want to conclude with the takeaway. Today our need is a Gospel Awakening. A Gospel Awakening comes through a revived church. A revived church is marked by God centered worship and small group disciple making. God centered worship and small group disciple making identify a congregation and a people who are "People of the Book". When they are people of the Book they will want to be unified in worship. Leaders will step forward to lead. There will be reverence and joy. There will be preparation and participation.

Do you know how often as I am working through a sermon or a meeting with the worship teams for the Lord's Day, I think "Lord, help us be good in preparing for this is worship for You"? I confess that I also periodically think preparation is one thing but participation is something else. Lord, who is going to show up for worship? It took me a while as a minister of the Gospel to realize this but now I know who will show up. It is those who want to show up. I understand there is providential hindrance, sickness and the ox in the ditch but by in large those who show up are those who want to show up. It will be those who want to worship God for they are people of the Book. It becomes the pinnacle of their life and the expression of their heart.

When I was in college we had a revival called "The Jesus People Revival". In the early 1970s they did an examination of churches that were multiplying. Do you know what the average attendance to worship was in the 1970s? Every member of those evangelical churches in the 1970s would gather for worship 3.4 Sundays of every month. Do you know what it is today? Today it is 1.6 Sundays a month. You can anticipate a member coming to worship each month. That is all of our insights on what attractive worship is which I think is actually counterproductive. I think I know what the problem

is. I think the problem is that we don't realize you can't be a people for God or even the people of God unless you are a people of the Book.

The Christian life is not intuitive. It doesn't make sense – one God, three Persons, two natures of Christ, give ten percent and ninety percent is greater, set aside one day the other six are more productive. You don't imagine up that stuff. That is God's Word. We are people of the Book. We are not people of intuition. We are people of revelation and that is God's Word has taken hold of us. When God's Word has taken hold of us then we long to worship God.

I fully realize that Briarwood has a marvelous legacy. Dr. Barker handed me a Bible when I came here as the passing of the mantel. One of our members buried a Bible underneath this pulpit when this platform was made as a reminder of the Word. I'm fully aware that this church has taken a stand for the inerrancy of God's Word. I'm fully aware of our legacy but my dear friends this is just a legacy then Briarwood would become a museum. That is where legacies go to die and be observed.

Has the Word of God taken hold of our hearts? Is there a hunger for it like the nursing babe for the milk? Is there an affection for it? Do we delight in the Word of the Lord day and night? Do we long for it? If so, then may God bring us a season of refreshing. It will be seen. The unimpeachable evidence is God centered worship. My country desperately needs the Gospel. I want Godly economic leaders, statesmen, laws and Godly people in every sphere of society but this I know. We can't have that or what needs to happen in this culture unless there is a movement of the Gospel of saving grace of Jesus Christ taking hold of the hearts and lives of men and women. If not, we will continue in this cultural death spiral. We won't have that Gospel Awakening without a revived church and if there is a revived church there will be a church of God centered worship, small group disciple making and it will be populated by people who know Christ who are people of the Book. They love God's Word that they might love the glorious God that that Word brings them to. That's what God brings us.

It my prayer, while my life isn't much longer, but I want to see it happen. It won't start out there. It will start right here. May God make this pulpit a tower of the Word. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the privilege to be with Your people today. Thank You for Jesus Christ, the glorious Lord of Glory. Here all of these people rose up to praise You with Nehemiah being the deliverer. Look where we stand O Jesus. We have all of the promises fulfilled in You. Fill us to overflowing. O God, please remove from us our self centeredness and help us to die and then live in the honor and glory of Christ. If you have not come to Christ today may I invite you to Him who will give you life? Just call upon Him and say "Lord, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling." There is life. The Word of the Lord and the work of Christ has been declared at the cross for you. Faith comes by hearing, come to Christ. Lord, we would rise up and bless Your Name. Bless the Lord O my soul, all that is within me bless Your Name, for Jesus' sake, Amen.