

Seeing Clearly in 2020

(Nehemiah 8)

(preached 12/29/19; Pine Grove BC Sun AM)

Introduction

If you have some Christmas money you would like to spend, I have a great suggestion.

For \$199, you can drive to Chester SC, climb on an airplane and skydive from 14,000 feet.

Personally, I can think of a lot of other things that I would spend \$200 on, but there are plenty of folks who love to jump out of perfectly good airplanes.

In fact, that business in Chester called Skydive Carolina has been operating since 1986.

This morning, we are going skydiving of sorts as we parachute into a passage in the OT.

I am not too fond of just jumping into a passage in the middle of a Bible book, but this morning we are going to jump into the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah chapter 8.

And the purpose behind this is two fold.

The first purpose is to get us thinking about the year ahead.

This is the last Sunday of 2019.

In a sense, the last Sunday of this decade, but that means it is the start of something new.

Now, we have said that New Year's celebrations are fine in terms of reflecting on Gods' care for the past year.

And also in terms in looking forward to what the Lord will do in the year ahead.

But we also know that resolutions are not something that believers need to get out of balance.

First of all, the desire to improve our lives is not a once a year event.

We are constantly seeking to put off sin and put on righteousness.

It is not a once a year event for us.

Second, resolutions that are dependent upon human achievement put us at the center of praise.

However, the desire of the believer should be for us to point to what God has done in our lives.

And to put Him at the center of praise.

So we don't get wrapped up in the world's obsession with New Year's resolutions, but that doesn't mean we discard the idea all together.

Look, it is always good to examine our lives.

To see our weaknesses and pursue things that are pleasing to the Lord.

It is always good to identify ways to improve our obedience to the Lord.

In that sense, resolutions are good and helpful for the believer, and that brings me back to my reason for parachuting into Nehemiah 8.

I think this passage will offer some great insight and motivation for an area of every believer's life that needs improvement.

And that is in our approach, our appreciation, and our application of God's Word.

A great resolution for the new year and the new decade is to commit to being people of the Word.

My prayer is that the Word of God would be the filter through which our entire lives run.

Every decision is not a question of what we want to do, but a result of what is most pleasing to the Lord according to His word.

My hope for this church is that our lives would be consumed with the truth of Scripture that we would bleed Bible when we are cut.

My desire for us is that our lives would be so lived under the authority of Scripture that we wouldn't be seen as Bible Thumpers but as Scripture Servants.

And though there are numerous passages that can help us understand the centrality of Scripture, Nehemiah 8 is where we will land with our parachute.

Now let me help us all get acquainted with our surroundings before we skim the chapter today.

Now the book of Nehemiah is situated toward the front half of the OT as the 16th of 39 books, but Nehemiah would be last if the OT were arranged perfectly chronological.

And the reason for that is the events of Nehemiah take place in 450 - 400 BC, which is really late in terms of OT events.

If you look at screen, this is a rough time line of the OT.

If you notice, the top line is creation to the tower of Babel which was roughly 4000 BC to 2200

And the second line begins with the call of Abram in 2000 BC.

And that was the foundation of Israel as a people that began with the call of one man.

Now Abram's family tree grew slowly at first but exploded in the book of Exodus when they were enslaved but eventually let go in Egypt in 1445.

From there, they made it to a land of their own on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea.

While in the land, they desired a king and got their first one in Saul, who was followed by David and then Solomon, which bring us to 1000 BC.

Under Solomon, the united kingdom became the divided kingdom with Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

Eventually, these two kingdoms fell.

The northern kingdom went first in 722 BC, and the southern went second in 586 BC.

And the Jewish were out of the land entirely for 70 years.

However, a shift of world power made it possible for the Jews to return to their land in the early 500s BC.

But it was a slow and painstaking return.

Not only had the Jews become less Jewish so to speak the they returned, there was opposition in the land where they once lived.

And the events of how the Jews were able to reestablish themselves in the land are told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

And these events are literally the last events that are recorded in Israel's history until Jesus is born.

So the theme of Ezra and Nehemiah and is how does God revive a people.

You see, Israel's absence from the land had changed them.

They had liked and adopted the culture of the nations where they had lived for 70 years.

Though they came back to the land that God has given them, their heart were far from God.

So how will God bring them close to Him again?

He will set his Word in a place of prominence in their lives.

You see, revival is always a result of the rediscovery of God's word.

And I will tell you this.

If you feel that you are far away from the Lord and in need of revival in the new year, go to His word and commit yourself to it.

Revival isn't found in some tent meeting with shouting and preachers stomping, it is found in the quiet discipline, daily study and full obedience to the word of God.

And Nehemiah 8 is going to be a great illustration of that truth.

I have divided this chapter into 3 sections.

Let's begin in verses 1-6 with what we will call..

I. Our Approach to the Word of God (1-8)

Let's read verses 1 and 2 of Nehemiah 8.

1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they [a]asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had [b]given to Israel.

When we arrive at chapter 8, much has been done physically in the land.

The Jews have returned and the temple has been rebuilt.

You see, the Jewish temple was destroyed in 586 BC when the final group of Jews were deported to Babylon.

So the first order of business in reformation was to rebuild that temple in the land.

But the next order of business is not physical but spiritual.

So God turns his attention to the people of land.

And the first thing God does to reform the people is to put a desire for his word in their heart.

Notice that verse 1 says the people gathered and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses.

And let me tell something.

God must put a desire in your heart for His Word before you will ever seek it out.

And that is exactly what God has done here.

Nobody calls a preacher and tells them to come preach to them unless God has been at work.

And I will tell you this.

Your resolution to make 2020 a year of growth in your attitude, appreciation, and application of the Bible must begin with prayer.

A. Prayerful (1)

And that prayer must be a pleading with God to give you a heart that desires his word.

If you attempt to create a new craving for the word of God on your own, you will fail miserably, but if God grants that request, you will have a craving for the word that will endure.

These Jews gathered in the town square and asked for Ezra to come and preach to them.

That is only the request of a people who have been given that desire by God.

So first of all, our approach to Scripture must be a prayerful one that asks God to give us a strong desire for His truth.

A second aspect of our approach to Scripture is found in verses 2-3..

Let's call this...

B. Dutiful (2-3)

So Ezra gathers the scroll containing the law and heads down to the gathering of Jews at the square..

Verse 2..

2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.

3 He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from [c]early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

Lots to see here in these 2 verses but let me point out the obvious.

#1- The reading was longer than shorter.

Ezra read from early morning which could 6-7 am until midday which was be noon.

We may make jokes about sermon lengths, but God takes serious how much time we spend in His Word.

I always want to be sensitive to the the people listening to the teaching and preaching of the Word.

I never want to abuse the incredible privilege of bring the Word to the people, but I will say this.

If you think you deserve a pat on the back for sitting through a 40 minute sermon, I would assure that the biblical pattern of being in the word is way more than an hour a week or 2 hours if you come to Sunday School.

It is even way more than 2 hours on Sunday morning and 1 hour on Sunday night and 1 hour on Wednesday night.

The pattern of biblical preaching is extended time listening to and applying the word of God.

The early church met every day to hear the apostles teaching.

Paul preached all night.

You can joke about the length of sermons and Sunday school lessons all you like but God takes it very seriously.

But we also see this in the text.

#2 - The people were engaged not distracted.

The end of verse 3 says that the people were attentive to the book of the law.

The Hebrew simply says that the people were “into” the book of the law.

In other words, they were engaged in it.

They were listening to it.

Let me also say that we may joke about sleeping through sermons, but God doesn't joke about it at all.

I often wonder what it says about a person who sleeps during a sermon.

I mean I have heard all sorts of explanations for sleeping.

Let me simply say this.

If you are tired, stay home and rest.

There is no sin in that at all as long as it doesn't become a practice of your life.

Because if you come and fall asleep, you can unknowingly become a horrible example for others.

In 2020, I pray that we resolve to give more time and greater attention to the presentation of the word of God in preaching, in Sunday School, and personal Bible study.

Be dutiful in your approach to Scripture.

A third aspect of our approach to Scripture is found in verse 5..

Let's call this..

C. Respectful (4-6)

Verse 4..

4 Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and

Meshullam on his left hand. 5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

Again, lots to see here but lets stick with the main points.

Notice that Ezra stood at a podium.

The podium was to put the word on center stage.

It is central to the scene here, and I am standing behind a podium even today to remind us that the the presentation of the word is central to the health and life of the people.

Also take note of the other men standing around Ezra, which highlights their endorsement of the word and the man presenting the word.

Next, pay attention to how the people responded to the presentation of the word.

They all stood up.

Now remember this is going to last for 4-6 hours, but this showed their great respect for God's word.

And also take note that the Ezra and the people bowed low and worshipped even before the word was read.

All of this picture speaks of the great respect that Ezra and the priests and the people had for the reading of the word.

Now to be clear, this doesn't mean that the reading of the word always requires a podium and everyone standing around.

But this does mean that the word is respected from the men presenting it to the people receiving it.

It grieves me to see the lack of respect for the word of God today.

Much of that grief is because people don't obey it, but some of that grief is because people simply don't respect the preaching of it.

People on phones during teaching and preaching times.

People running late to teaching and preaching times.

People talking during preaching and teaching times.

We live in a culture of distraction and short attention spans and rudeness and that even spills over into time when the word of God is presented to others.

In our approach to the word of God in the new year, let us approach it with our full respect and attention.

A fourth principle to how we approach Scripture is seen in verses 7-8...

D. Purposeful (7-8)

Let's look at verse 7..

7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. 8 They read from the book, from the law of God, [d]translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

If you ever wonder why I am committed to expository preaching, here it is.

Preaching is not just proclamation but explanation.

In fact, expository means to explain.

And this is the pattern for biblical.

This is not a pulpit where I bully you.

This is a pulpit where I am called to help you.

I am called to shepherd you.

I am called to help you understand what God means by what HE has said.

Along with that, this pulpit is not a source of entrainment for you.

It is not a place you come to endure the sermon and leave the same as you came.

For the listener, this pulpit is a place for you to grow in your understanding of Scripture.

And when you do, you know God better.

And the more you know Him, the more you love Him, and the more desire you will have to obey Him.

Be purposeful in your approach to the word of God.

Don't read it and study it without any aim.

Read it, study it, have it taught to you with the purpose of understanding it.

As long as yall will have me, I plan to help you understand the word of God better.

Yes, I am a preacher and there is fire in my belly, but my goal is to the proper sense of the word of God in your hearts.

When I first got here, some folks left and said that I was too much of a teacher.

They wanted preaching and not teaching.

I am not sure what they meant by that because they never came to me personally.

But let me tell you.

The man in the pulpit is called to proclaim the word but explaining the word.

How can you ever celebrate and apply the truth of Scripture if you don't understand it?

So set your hearts to approach the word with the purpose of understanding it better in 2020.

Now that leads to verses 9-12, which I will call..

II. Our Appreciation for the Word of God (9-12)

Look at verses 9..

9 Then Nehemiah, who was the [e]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 were weeping when they heard the words of the law.

Why was there weeping over hearing the word of God?

Simple.

The word brings conviction.

Though we don't know the chapter and verses that Ezra read to the people, he read enough to remind the people of their sin and disobedience.

One preacher has said that it is hard to pick up the Bible and not get a spanking from the Lord.

And that is what occurred here.

And it was conviction from a story that Ezra told or a song that the people heard.

It was conviction from a proper presentation and explanation of the word of God.

As I have said before on numerous occasions, some people don't come to church because it brings conviction to their hearts.

But also understand, there are people here every week physically but they have tuned out the truth to keep from openly weeping in service.

The word of God is convicting to the core.

The book of Hebrews says that it pierces the soul and spirit and judges even our thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The people were weeping because their souls were being pierced with truth.

But notice verses 10-12..

10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." 12 All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to

[f]celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

What is going on here?

Shouldn't Ezra and Nehemiah encourage this sadness over sin?

Why in the world would they tell the people to get up and go eat and celebrate?

Well, first of all, it was a holy day that the Jews set aside to rest and remember the Lord.

So the leaders of Israel tell them to stop crying and start celebrating the goodness of God.

And what was reason for celebration?

Look at the end of verse 12 again..

because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

Let me simply this church.

Appreciate the total ministry of the word of God in your life.

Look, we love to copy and paste verses on our social media that celebrate God's faithfulness and blessing.

WE love to frame Bible verses and hang them on the walls of our home.

But let me also tell you this.

You need to appreciate the hard verses of Scripture.

You need to appreciate verses that point out your sin and offer correction.

And above all, you need to appreciate your ability to understand the word of God.

Look, be sad and repent where repentance is called for in the Bible.

Rejoice and be glad where your life is in line with Scripture.

But ultimately, appreciate the ministry of the word in your life.

There is time for sorrow and grief, but don't grieve forever.

Get up and obey and be glad that you know the truth.

The Jews were not to cry all night.

They had heard the truth and the truth sets free.

It doesn't bind us in sadness forever.

May 2020 be a year where we appreciate the value of God's word in our life to convict and encourage.

A final area of resolve in our lives toward the word of God is found in verses 13-18..

We will call this.

III. Our Application of the Word of God (13-18)

This will be brief but very important.

Gods' word is valuable and convicting and interesting, but the most important part is that it is life altering.

We must apply the word of God to our hearts, and that is exactly what we see to close out this chapter..

Verse 13..

13 Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. 14 They found written in the law how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. 15 [g]So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and [h]wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of 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 The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in [i]them. The sons

of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. 18 He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

Again, much to see but little time, so let me give you a quick explanation.

God had given Israel a number of festivals to celebrate in the days of Moses.

The 3 major ones were Passover in the spring, Pentecost in the early summer, and the feast of booths in the fall.

In fact, the feast of booths took place in the 7th month.

Well, the Jews had kept those festivals for many years.

However, the final festival, the festival of booths had not been the same since the days of Joshua, which was almost a 1000 years earlier in Israel's history.

Now what was different about this festival of booths in Nehemiah 8?

Some say that it was simply different because of the joy of the people in rediscovering the law.

And that may be the case.

The text simply isn't that specific.

But one suggestion is that the Jews had not actually built the booths to live in since the days of Joshua.

Instead they had just pitched tents or used other similar shelter.

But the point of the festival was to remind the Jews of God's provision for them by providing shelter on their way out of Egypt.

And the instructions for the festival in Leviticus 23 required the Jews to build the shelters out of branches and tree limbs.

In other words, the Jews had gotten lazy in their celebration of this festival, but the word of God had brought them clarity and conviction about how it was to be celebrated.

And that is so important to remember.

The word is convicting but conviction without change is useless.

The Jews rediscovered the truth but didn't ignore it.

They practiced it as well..

And two other quicks notes I want to make from this last section are seen in verse 13..

13 Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.

So on day 1, the people gathered, heard the word, and were convicted about their negligence toward the word.

But notice, they don't wait until the next week to get things in order.

On the very next day, the fathers of the homes gather to hear from Ezra again.

And this reminds us that obedience to the word should never be delayed.

And this also reminds us that men are called to be the spiritual leaders in their homes.

Notice, the men gathered to hear from Ezra.

They didn't send their wives to hear from Ezra.

They didn't send their kids to hear from Ezra.

They went to Ezra because they took their responsibility to lead their families and the nation back to the Lord.

I cannot stress the importance of men taking the spiritual lead in their homes and in the church.

If you are a man in here this morning who does not lead your family spiritually, forget about your resolutions to exercise more and eat less.

The physical care of your body is of far less importance than the spiritual care of your family and church.

The Jews were convicted of their lack of knowledge of the word, and the men immediately took the lead to get their families and their nation back on track.

May we do the same.

Conclusion

So what do we take with us on the last Sunday of 2019?

How do we see clear in 2020?

#1 - Examine your approach to the word of God.

Do you have a hunger for the Word?

If not, beg God to give you that desire.

Do you take advantages of opportunities to hear the word of God?

Repent of complaining about how much time church takes, and be grateful to be in a church where the word is taught accurately and faithfully multiple times a week.

Do you engage when the word is presented?

If not, you should.

Our attendance, our arrival, and our attentiveness at church should be surpass our attendance, arrival, and attentiveness of our work.

Do you seek understanding of the word of God?

You should.

Why read and hear the Bible taught if you are seeking to understand what you are hearing?

#2 - Express your appreciation for the word of God.

First, thank God when the word brings conviction into you life.

Also thank God when the word comforts your soul.

Ultimately, we should be grateful that the Scriptures are helpful in saving and then sanctifying us.

#3- Excel in your application of the word of God.

The final step in changing our attitude to the word of God is simply obeying and applying what we are learning.

And let's be clear.

Don't delay obedience to what you are learning and understanding.

The time to obey is now.

The time to excel in your application of the word is tomorrow and not next week or next month.

May the new year be a time when we develop a new approach, appreciation, and application of the Word of God.

Let us pray.