

A PROCLAIMING PRIEST

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's people gather to hear the Word of the Lord (Neh. 8:1-8).
2. God's people display the joy of the Lord (Neh. 8:9-12).
3. God's people unite to obey the commands of the Lord (Neh. 8:13-18).

Background Passages: Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah 8

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

When God's people hear the Word of the Lord, they find joy and seek to obey God's commands.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When God's people heard the reading of His Word, they confessed their sins and committed to obeying God's law in response. The people, however, would fail to obey God as they had promised. Jesus is the Word of God who takes away our sin, gives us His righteousness, and changes our hearts so we can obey God.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have received salvation through Jesus, the Word of God, we seek to worship Him in all we do as a way to proclaim His glory to the nations.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: With Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, the former cupbearer turned governor of the region began to rebuild their city and their identity (Neh. 5:14). As with most big projects, they had their share of troubles, both inside and out. Enemies threatened, and opportunists took advantage, but through it all, Nehemiah's one-sentence prayers sustained him and his people as they slowly but surely rebuilt the wall (5:19; 6:9). Then came the even larger challenge: Who would this people be? Would they be those who despised their God and their people or would they be the people the Lord had called them to be in His Word?

EXPLAIN: Share the memory of a project you began, including how long you thought it would take and how much you thought it would cost. Explain briefly any trouble you experienced, extra expenses incurred, and how the setbacks affected other parts of your life.

DISCUSS: **What are some ways you respond when you face setbacks in a project?** (wait for group members to respond)

TRANSITION: God's people had been working hard and fighting their enemies—often at the same time. Their struggles had worn them down. But then something happened that changed everything: they heard the Word of the Lord. We might take God's Word for granted in our lives today, with multiple Bibles in every Christian home. But the returning exiles saw God's Word differently—it was precious. We would be wise to learn from today's narrative that God's Word is reason enough to pause from our work, listen with care, and consider the condition of our hearts and lives.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: **How does Scripture change us?** (it gives us peace; it gives us instruction to act; it helps us not fear or worry; it brings us joy in the knowledge of God; it gives us encouragement in sorrow)

POINT 1

GOD'S PEOPLE GATHER TO HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:1-8).

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 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, Anaiah, 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.

READ: Because of the names, read aloud **Nehemiah 8:1-8** yourself for this point.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-4** commentary to highlight how God's Word is our authority (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #5: Authority of Scripture: Since the Bible is the **inspired** Word from God, God's special revelation to humanity, the Bible is the ultimate standard of authority for the Christian. Because it is **truthful** in everything that it teaches, Scripture is humanity's source for wisdom, instructing us on how to live life well to the glory of God. Submitting to the authority of Scripture means that we are to **believe** and **obey** God by believing and obeying His Word.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we submit to the authority of God's Word? (read the Scriptures; listen to faithful preaching; share it with others; obey it)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-8** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Those who **hear** the Word of the Lord are **humbled** and worship God.

NOTES

THE BOOK OF THE LAW OF MOSES

Read on scrolls, the Torah, or Pentateuch, included the first five books of our modern-day Bible. These books were written by Moses under the inspiration of God: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"We need to repent of the haughty way in which we sometimes stand in judgment upon Scripture and must learn to sit humbly under its judgment instead. If we come to Scripture with our minds made up, expecting to hear from it only an echo of our own thoughts and never the thunderclap of God's, then indeed he will not speak to us and we shall only be confirmed in our own prejudices."¹

—John Stott (1921-2011)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-4 / Every now and then, a congregation is blessed with a faithful, encouraging leader who serves that church for decades. That was Ezra. He had come to Jerusalem from Babylon approximately a dozen years before Nehemiah brought his own caravan. But Ezra's reputation had preceded him: "Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). We see here the description of a believer who is fully committed to the Lord: head, heart, and hands focused on Him, willing to study, willing to let the Word change his heart, and then choosing to pass on God's wisdom and instructions to others.

It's not certain whether Ezra remained in Jerusalem after his initial journey or he returned at a later date. But in these verses, the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, and we are blessed to see how two people—one a bookworm and a teacher, one a leader and an administrator—work together, using their complementary skills to lead God's people to obedience.

Building the wall had been a hard-fought battle, but we read in Nehemiah 6 that the wall was completed in 52 days (6:15). When their enemies heard the news, "all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem," not because they thought the Jews were mighty but because "they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" (6:16).

The people then gathered in Jerusalem, safe and secure, and asked Ezra to bring God's Word out before them. Ezra may have been the only person in Jerusalem at that time who had access to a copy of God's law, and it wouldn't be a stretch to imagine that this treasured parchment had come with him thirteen years earlier. We can only imagine Ezra's joy that the sacred Word of the Lord was now being requested by the people. Not only that, but **"the ears of all the people were attentive."**

We see it intentionally recorded that **"both men and women and all who could understand what they heard"** were there from daybreak until noon, perhaps six hours of intense listening. This united, multi-generational congregation had likely never known such a time of public reading, as they had all been born into exile. Their desire to hear and know God's Word revealed their heart to align themselves with their God.

VERSES 5-8 / We read that Ezra opened the book, but if your mental picture of this story contains a book similar to today's Bibles, that would be inaccurate. The Egyptians had developed the technology of using long papyrus strips, rolled after writing, hundreds of years before this time, but it was still the predominant standard for recording information.² Since he was on a raised platform, Ezra's unrolling of the scroll was visible to all, the holy act of opening the Word of the Lord inspired everyone to stand.

The Hebrew word translated **"stood"** is rich in meaning. Besides standing physically, it can also mean to take a stand or hold one's ground, to stop, to delay or remain. The people in Nehemiah 8, then, stood in reverence and in unity before the Word of God.

After the people stood, Ezra **"blessed the LORD,"** praising Him for who He is. David did the same in Psalm 103:1-2, where he instructed his own soul to bless the Lord, and for the rest of the song, he listed the awe-inspiring holiness of Yahweh. With hands raised, the people before Ezra cried, **"Amen, Amen,"** reflecting their agreement with the proceedings. We say, "Amen," when we confirm the words of another and hope in the same truths.

Then the people bowed low, with faces to the ground, in worship, in humility. And the Levites helped explain the words to those who didn't understand. So this was not only a teaching or sermon, it was a full-body worship experience.

POINT 2

GOD'S PEOPLE DISPLAY THE JOY OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:9-12).

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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.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 8:9-12** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 9** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

As we read and understand God's Word, it will bring us to **repentance** and confession, but even in this, we should still **celebrate** the Lord.

DISCUSS: Why should conviction of sin result in our joy? (because God disciplines those He loves; our conviction is an opportunity to confess our sin and be forgiven; our conviction is an opportunity to become more like Christ, who is sinless; conviction is a grace of God by which we see our need for Jesus)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 10-12** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God's presence and **promises**, when understood from His **Word**, remind us to celebrate Him with others who share in these same gifts.

DISCUSS: How can we live so that our joy as believers in Christ can be seen by others for the glory of God? (our joy and peace in times of trial can encourage others; our joy and hope in the gospel should result in less worry and stress; we live in joy and celebration to show others we are waiting for the Lord)

TRANSITION: We know that in God's story, there are no coincidences. It was no coincidence that the Jews just happened to request Ezra's reading of the Word on the first day of the seventh month, and it's no coincidence that the day they heard God's law for the first time in generations was a day they were to celebrate. The holy timing of God is flawless, and we are blessed when we see His hand moving in our lives and circumstances. But God's people didn't stop their hearing of the Word at one day; they wanted to know more.

FEAST OF TRUMPETS

Also called Rosh Hashanah, this feast was a time of rest and commemoration announced by the blowing of a trumpet, or shofar, and included a food offering (Lev. 23:23-25). It was celebrated in the fall to mark the beginning of a new agricultural year, as God's people remembered God's provision and were prompted to repent.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 9 / The scene of Nehemiah 8 reveals not only a body of believers but also a beautiful picture of biblical unity: young and old, men and women, leaders from every walk of life gathered as one to hear God’s Word. Nehemiah stood with the authority of the Persian crown, reminding us of the need for godly men and women in governmental service. Ezra was a priest and scribe, devoting his life to the study of God’s Word and to interceding before the Lord on behalf of the people. The Levites were different from the priests—even though all priests were Levites—in that they had responsibilities in the temple but not the intercessory ones of priests. Thirty-eight Levites had returned to Jerusalem with Ezra (Ezra 8:15-19).

We saw in verse 8 that the Levites had explained the law, translating it and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read. Verse 9 adds that Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites all played a role in instructing the people. The root word translated **“taught”** in verse 9 points to separating mentally, discerning, or enabling understanding. Then as now, teachers of God’s Word must be certain that their audience hears not only the audible sound of the words but ingests their meaning and significance.

We don’t know where Ezra chose to read from God’s Word that day, but we know that it was **“the Law”** of Moses and that it caused the people to weep. Likely, these exiled Jews were coming to grips with the fact that they had lived far from God’s temple and His commands, leading them to repent and mourn over their disobedience. And though godly repentance is important in the faith of one who follows the Lord, there was a significance to **“this day,”** as Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites explained—it was **“holy to the LORD.”** This day was the first day of the seventh month (8:2), which we see described in Numbers 29:1-6 as the Festival of Trumpets. On that day, God’s people were not to do any work but to offer a burnt offering and sound the trumpets. This day was not an ordinary day—it was a

festival! It was a time to celebrate the Lord, call attention to Him, and make an offering for sin.

VERSES 10-12 / How do you celebrate a milestone? Many people enjoy time with friends and a good meal, accompanied with lots of laughter and talking. That seems to encapsulate the essence of the instructions for how the Jews were to celebrate the Festival of Trumpets: **“Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine,”** and share your extras with others. This first day of the seventh month was not a time to count calories! The menu of rich food and sweet drink may make us think of a New’s Year Eve party, which in essence it was!

Perhaps you’ve found yourself in a similar situation: You recommitted your faith or started walking in obedience, and then something came across your path—an old friend, an old journal, an old photo—and a million shames fell upon you: “I’m nowhere near where I need to be. I’m just going to fail again. Who am I fooling?” Nehemiah and Ezra would look at you and gently say, “Take today to celebrate where you’ve come, not how far it is to perfection.” We can celebrate even as we struggle because God is who we’re celebrating. He has been faithful, He has been with us, and His promises are forever. Or as the Jews were told, **“the joy of the LORD is your strength.”** When you’re feeling low in your own strength, choose to celebrate in God, our stronghold!

The Levites then **“calmed all the people”** and told them to **“be quiet, for this day is holy.”** This wasn’t a contradiction to their encouragement to celebrate; instead, it was an encouragement to be at peace, to stop mourning, finding confidence before the Lord. So the celebration ensued **“because they had understood the words that were declared to them.”** In the same way, we can find joy in the fact that we understand the Word of the Lord and that we know the Word of the Lord—Jesus—by faith!

POINT 3

GOD'S PEOPLE UNITE TO OBEY THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:13-18).

NOTES

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. **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.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 8:13-18** from his or her Bible.

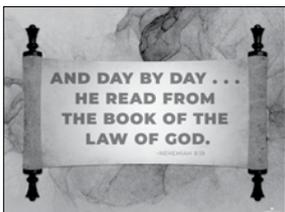
EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

When God's leaders take the responsibility to know and **obey** His Word, the entire community is **blessed**.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-18** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Obeying God may require repentance, celebration, stepping out of our **normal** comfort zone, putting our lives at risk, or hard work, but we know that obeying God requires **reading** His Word, and obeying will lead to **joy**.

DISCUSS: Recall the Scripture verse on **PACK ITEM 12: READ THE BOOK**, and then ask: **What are some reasons we might fail to recognize the privilege we have to read and hear God's Word?** (as sinners, we are selfish with our time; we have never been without God's Word handy and cannot imagine what it would be like not to have God's Word available; unbelievers aren't likely to recognize the significance of God having spoken to us in His Word; we may view Scripture as just one authority among many in our lives; in our sin, we put ourselves in the seat of judgment over the validity and truthfulness of Scripture)



COMMENTARY

VERSES 13-14 / In Nehemiah 8:2, we saw that “on the first day of the seventh month,” the people requested that Ezra read the Word to them, and they had responded with contrition and celebration through observance of the Festival of Trumpets. Here, “**on the second day,**” we see that only a portion of the people assembled for a second day of reading: the family heads, priests, and Levites. This time of the year was a season of harvest, which required many hands, so the smaller gathering makes sense.³ But it’s also worth noting that each family leader, as well as each religious leader, determined to stay.

What a strong reminder to us today: leaders must assume spiritual leadership. Whether we find ourselves as heads of a household, head of a group, or head of an informal circle of friends, we must accept the position in which God has placed us and the responsibility that goes with it—to read, know, understand, and believe God’s Word.

As these leaders studied together, they found another passage that identified another celebration in the same month. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, God’s people were instructed to celebrate the Festival of Shelters (or Tabernacles or Booths) to the Lord. In Leviticus 23:33-36,39-42, we see the details of this festival: there was a sacred assembly of complete rest on the first and eighth days, no daily work, and a food offering was presented for eight days. On the first day, while rejoicing, they built shelters from leafy trees and lived in those shelters for the seven days of the festival. Why? “That your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 23:43). This festival looked back to God’s faithfulness and authority in the lives of His people, both at the time of Moses (1400s BC) and the time of Nehemiah (400s BC). This was a command to live out their faith, remembering God and His fulfilled promises.

Again, we can take this example and consider a similar time of remembrance in our own lives. As a family, consider God’s faithfulness to you individually, as a household, and as an extended family line. Share these stories aloud, choosing to point out God’s acts of mercy and love. Perhaps like the Jews, this would be a great yearly activity for each family.

VERSES 15-18 / Like a mother watching her preschooler willingly pick up his toys for the first time, we can only imagine the thoughts going through Ezra’s mind at this point: “They’re doing it! After all this time, they are actually obeying!” For a people starved of the Word and presence of the Lord, their hunger to know and obey was evident in their actions. For starters, they proclaimed and spread the message throughout the towns and in Jerusalem, teaching friends and relatives what was commanded, how to obey, and when the festival was to start. Like good news spreading through good friends, the united focus on God and His Word spread through the Jewish community of returned exiles.

The people didn’t just agree to or consider the instruction, they obeyed through physical work, gathering branches in the hill country and bringing them back to Jerusalem. Some made shelters on rooftops or in courtyards if they lived in the city. Others built their shelters in the public areas. Not only would this act help them remember their ancestors who had lived one thousand years before, but it would bring them out of their homes and their daily routine, allowing them to spend time together, face to face, focused on the Lord.

These shelters weren’t built for a time of hardship but for celebration: “**There was very great rejoicing,**” more so than anyone could recall or find recorded. Each day of the festival was marked by the reading of God’s Word and celebration. Finally, after all their years in exile, God’s people were walking in obedience to His Word and finding the joy that comes as a result.

MY RESPONSE

Because we have received salvation through Jesus, the Word of God, we seek to worship Him in all we do as a way to proclaim His glory to the nations.

NOTES

HEAD:

God's Word has authority, power, and reverence in our lives. Many Christians might affirm this statement mentally, but their lives are void of daily, intentional, focused Bible reading and study. Bible reading, as the Jews in Nehemiah 8 testified, is of utmost importance, but the reading itself is not simply an item to be checked off our daily to-do list. No, it's the focal point of our day, our season, and our seeking. From daily reading, we are prompted to study, memorize, apply, meditate, and regularly consider what God is saying to us.

What impact does God's Word have in your life? How do you know?

HEART:

The best stories stir up a number of emotions in us: longing, reflection, pain, joy, triumph, and more. A true interaction with the Bible does the same: we shout for joy, we weep over sin, we raise our hands in celebration, and we fall to our knees in submission. And in congregational Bible involvement, our emotional response is not muted but rather expressed in the midst of brothers and sisters hearing the same Word. Don't hold back the emotions and feelings that God's Word stirs in you. Whether individually or corporately, allow the Bible to direct, shape, and change your heart.

What attitudes toward Scripture do you need to confess so you can prioritize God's Word for the health of your soul and your church?

HANDS:

If you are holding a Bible in your hands right now, recognize that you are holding the Word of the Lord. Pause for just a moment and consider the weight of this statement. God's people are called to know His Word, to make His redemption story our redemption story. In the hands of God's people, the Bible is the mightiest of tools, used to encourage, uplift, chastise, help, comfort, relieve, and direct. Wielded correctly, we can use it to defend against the enemy, raise the head of the fallen, and strengthen the knees of the weak. We share it with our mouths and with our fingers at the direction and inspiration of God's Spirit.

Who in your life needs to hear the Word of God this week? How will you share it with them?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"It is a holy day of the Lord for us when we take pains to hear and carry out His words."⁴

—Bede (c. 673-735)

POINT 1: GOD'S PEOPLE GATHER TO HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:1-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“The people in our text were both attentive and reverent when God’s Word was read to them. Verse 3 mentions their attentiveness, and verses 5 & 6 show their reverence. They stood up as if to greet a royal visitor, and then they bowed down in worship. They were not worshipping the actual scroll that Ezra held in his hand, but rather the God who had given the words of that scroll to Moses and through Moses to them. Attentiveness stems from reverence. If we maintain our reverence for God and that fact that He is speaking to us through His Word, we will pay attention to what He says. If we forget that this is the Word of the living God to us, our minds will wander to other things. I realize that preachers can sometimes be boring. But if I lose your attention, direct your mind to the text of Scripture and ask the Lord to open it to your heart.”⁵

+ COMMENTARY

“Nehemiah did not explain exactly how Ezra and the Levites read and explained God’s ‘Law’ to this large crowd that may have numbered between 30,000 and 50,000 people (Neh. 7:66-67). Possibly Ezra read sections of the Law in the presence of ‘all the people’ (8:3), and then at certain times ‘the Levites’ circulated among them and made ‘it clear’ (pāraš, ‘to make distinct or interpret,’ possibly means here ‘to translate’ from Heb. to Aram.) and explained (gave ‘the meaning’ of) what Ezra had read as the people stood in groups (vv. 7-8). The most gratifying thing that happened, of course, is that the people obeyed God’s Word. What they heard touched their emotions, for they wept as they heard ‘the Law’ (v. 9). Apparently they were remorseful over their past disobedience to the Law and contrite over their sins.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

Create the mood for Point 1 by asking: “Have you ever shown up to an event and thought, ‘Everyone is here!’ or ‘This is a much bigger crowd than I expected!’ How did you feel about that large group?” Learners may want to consider something relatively small, like a family reunion, or something large, like a concert. Show the pictures from the following website containing photos of some of the largest gatherings in history: <https://www.inproduction.net/post/a-look-at-some-of-the-largest-gatherings-in-history>. If you don’t have a way to show the photos on a large screen, send the link to learners and have them look through the images on their phones.

EXTRA

Say: “We can assume that most people didn’t realize they would be in the presence of millions of people when they decided to attend these events. But the crowds had the same purpose, the same ideals, and the same desire to attend.”

Point out that we sometimes focus on the differences we have between people, but in a corporate worship setting, we should instead be focused on our shared focus, shared worship, and shared God. As a group, consider how finding similar ground among other Christians could strengthen your congregation and devotion to the Lord. Ask: “What can we do to engage others to hear God’s Word, seek His face in prayer, and worship Him wholeheartedly?”

POINT 2: GOD’S PEOPLE DISPLAY THE JOY OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:9-12).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“The only joy that reflects the worth of God and overflows in God-glorifying love is rooted in the true knowledge of God. And to the degree that our knowledge is small or flawed, our joy will be a poor echo of God’s true excellence. The experience of Israel in Nehemiah 8:12 is a paradigm of how God-glorifying joy happens in the heart. Ezra had read the word of God to them and the Levites had explained it. And then the people went away ‘to make great rejoicing.’ Their great rejoicing was because they had understood words—the true words of God.”⁷

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

Before digging into Point 2, say: “There are situations and circumstances that some people would consider to be always somber and always serious. A hospital ward, for instance, may seem to carry a solemn vibe. But let’s consider what might happen when someone brings some joy into a solemn room.”

Show the following 3-minute clip from the movie *Patch Adams*, in which a medical student (played by Robin Williams) chooses to start clowning around in a children’s ward:
<https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/patch-adams/clowning-around>.

As a group, consider some other places that are considered to be solemn or serious. (Answers may include a school, a nursing home, a funeral home, a place of business, a doctor’s or dentist’s office, etc.) Ask for a volunteer to share a time when he or she found or watched someone find joy, laughter, or humor in just such a place. Point out that some people turn to humor when they are hurting (as you can see in this Chonda Pierce article: http://chonda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Todays_Christian_Woman.pdf).

However, there is also the option of joy. In the midst of every difficulty, we have the option to rejoice because of God. We have been told that we can find joy because we will see Jesus (John 16:22), because we have salvation through Him (Rom. 5:1-5), because God puts it in our hearts (Ps. 4:7), and because the joy of Jesus is in us (John 15:11). Enlist a volunteer to read Philippians 2:1-2 aloud from his or her Bible, and point out that we can find joy from being in the midst of like-minded believers. This is exactly what the Jews in Nehemiah 8 were experiencing.

POINT 3: GOD'S PEOPLE UNITE TO OBEY THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:13-18).

+ COMMENTARY

“Other Scripture passages indicate that the Feast of Tabernacles had been celebrated regularly (by Solomon in 2 Chr 8:13, Hezekiah in 2 Chr 31:3, Josiah in 2 Chr 35:18, and the future celebration in Zech 14:16–18). What was different? The feast had two principal meanings: (1) it was an agricultural festival to commemorate the ‘ingathering’ of the harvest (Exod 34:22); (2) it was a memorial celebration of the wilderness wanderings. Apparently through the years the harvest application had been emphasized, but the living in booths to remember the wilderness wanderings had been neglected. As the people examined Scripture here, they returned to that emphasis, which was appropriate after their new exodus in returning from the Babylonian captivity. One effect of the continued study of Scripture is that it helps us adjust our traditions according to the divine standard.”⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

Before class, assign one or two dog-loving volunteers to read through the following website about the twenty most obedient large dog breeds: <https://www.newsweek.com/20-most-obedient-large-dog-breeds-1591598>. Explain to them that you’ll need to hear some details about ten of them, including both positive and negative characteristics of their obedience.

Divide a board into thirds using two vertical lines. Label the far left “Dog breed,” the center “Obedient,” and the far right “However.” Invite your volunteer(s) to share about the dogs she chose, giving some information as to why each breed is noted for its willingness to obey but any reasons why the obedience level might be hindered (such as size, independent streaks, or temperament). Write one-word descriptions on the board for each dog breed’s willingness to obey (under “Obedient”) and any concerns (under “However”).

Then erase all the dog breeds and replace the title of the column with “Christians.” Leave the second and third titles (“Obedient” and “However”), but erase the descriptions in the columns. Write your own name at the top of the first column list. Just like you were talking about the dogs, describe your own tendency to obey but also acknowledge your lack of obedience. (For example: “As long as everything is going well, I’m pretty much on board with following the Bible. But when I’m stressed or behind on sleep or dealing with a problem I can’t solve, I know I struggle to be kind, joyful, and loving.”)

Encourage learners to consider their own willingness to obey God’s commands as you read through the passage and commentary for Point 3. Ask: “What might we write about ourselves on this board?”

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