

A PROCLAIMING PRIEST

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

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

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGES:**

Ezra 7–10; Nehemiah 8

+ **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?

DAY 1

READ:

Ezra 7

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Ezra 7:1-10

NOTES

There is great joy in knowing someone well.

Understanding a person's hopes, dislikes, loves, passions, and background helps us to be a better friend, spouse, parent, and human. In getting to know God's people from generations long ago, we have the benefit of getting to know them better as well.

This week's focal passage is Nehemiah 8, but one of the main characters in that narrative, Ezra, is described in detail in Ezra 7. So before we dig into his role in this week's lesson, let's get to know him a little better.

His background: Ezra was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first high priest. Like a doctor whose father was a doctor, as was his father before him, Ezra surely had heard the stories of generations from his family line serving the Lord through their priesthood. And though the destruction of the temple and the exile had undone that role, Ezra still made it his identity to know the Word.

His skill: Ezra was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses (Ezra 7:6). One never gets skilled in something unless he practices, so we can be certain Ezra had spent many hours not only copying and learning the law but also observing it.

His blessing: Ezra had received favor from the Persian king because God's hand was on him (Ezra 7:6). As Ezra chose to walk in obedience to God's Word, God poured out His blessings on the faithful scribe.

His journey: The trip from Babylon to Jerusalem was no Sunday drive; it took four months. Travel at that time was nowhere near easy, and choosing to leave all he had ever known of home to return to the land of his ancestors proved his faith.

What aspects of Ezra's life and discipline can you glean and apply to your own (see especially Ezra 7:10)?

DAY 2

READ:

Nehemiah 8

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 8:1-3

NOTES

Sometimes we just need to be together.

I come from a tight extended family. My seven cousins and I are all within eight years of age, and we grew up together as best friends. We genuinely love seeing each other, and as we've grown older, we've also grown closer, cherishing both our past and present stories as a group.

So when our favorite uncle died unexpectedly in the spring of 2020, just as government-mandated shutdowns and pandemic protocols were spreading like wildfire, we felt so far apart. We got the news on group text. We cried together over our phones. We knew we were trying to keep from spreading harmful germs to people we loved most, but our hearts were crying out, "I need to hug her neck! I need to wipe those tears!"

Isolation kills us from the inside out; gathering together helps us to heal, inspire, encourage, and share. When my family finally got together for the first time after my uncle's death, it felt like a breath of fresh air even as we mourned together. I felt healing in seeing tears in my cousins' eyes, knowing we shared the common bond of feeling, hoping, and weeping over our loss.

This is the exact environment that the Jews had created for themselves in Nehemiah 8: everyone together. This wasn't a gathering for the scholars or the men or the teachers; it was for everyone who could understand what they heard (v. 2). We can accurately envision multiple generations from multiple families all gathered together to hear the Word of the Lord. They didn't send the little kids off to Sunday School or out to play or have the women go cook; this was everyone together. We might call that community at its best.

How do you include your family in multi-generational worship, gatherings, and service?

DAY 3

READ:

Nehemiah 8:1-6

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 8:4-6

NOTES



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.

We know that God blesses us: He sends rain and sun, winter and summer, good days and bad, times of work and times of healing. We have experienced the blessings of the Lord and, if we have eyes to see, understand that they are everlasting and indescribably overflowing.

But sometimes we don't realize that we can bless God too. It seems like an odd concept—How can we, who are infinitely less powerful and understanding, bless our almighty God? The idea of blessing God includes not only kneeling but also praising or greeting. Abraham's servant blessed the Lord when he found Rebekah as a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:48). David blessed the Lord as he and the people had donated items for the temple to be built (1 Chronicles 29:10), as did Hezekiah as he and his people rededicated their lives to following the Lord and again collected offerings for the temple (2 Chronicles 31:8).

We bless the Lord when we acknowledge that He has blessed us. Blessing God flows from a faith that recognizes God as the source of every good thing. When we give Him credit for painting a beautiful sunset, for keeping us from danger, for helping us have a good belly laugh, or for the chance to eat a delicious meal, we bless God.

It is no surprise, then, that Ezra opened his worship service and time of community reading by blessing the Lord, "the great God" (v. 6). With hands raised and knees bowed, the community of faith joined in elevating God in their hearts. That picture is a reflection of what blessing the Lord does to our hearts and minds: we lift Him up as we humble ourselves. In pointing to His grace, mercy, and abundant faithfulness, we bless His name with our attitudes, our spirits, and our lives.

What can you do today to bless the Lord as Ezra and the Israelites did?

DAY 4

READ:

Nehemiah 8:7-12

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 8:9-12

NOTES

It is easy to fall into a pit of despair. Sometimes we're overwhelmed with the fears and horrors of our world, fully aware of injustices, catastrophes, and dangers. Sometimes it's not even the big things that cause us to despair but the daily things: the grind of work, the raising of children, the planning for the future. And sometimes those concerns are compounded by our own inadequacies, our own failures, and our own sin.

If you've ever despaired, it's pretty easy to imagine the mind-set of the Jews gathered in Nehemiah 8. They had been born into a nation that had been exiled for its idolatry and disobedience to God. They had been brave enough to return to Jerusalem in an attempt to rebuild the city, only to find opposition and confrontation for all their efforts.

And when they finally finished the wall and felt like they could breathe, choosing to hear the Word of the Lord for the first time in who knows how long, they realized just how far they had fallen from obedience. We can hear their thoughts: "Will we ever get this right? We're not even close to living as God prescribed!" Just like we would likely do, they mourned.

But Ezra and Nehemiah saw their hearts: These people were seeking God, choosing to hear, and wanting to obey. So instead of heaping guilt upon them, they gave them different instructions: go have a party, eat rich foods, drink sweet drinks, and share with others for today is holy to the Lord (v. 10).

Don't let despair of the world, the daily grind, or your own shortcomings drag you down. Take time to enjoy God's blessings—celebrate His Word and His faithfulness.

How can you and your family celebrate God this week?

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Understanding the words of God was the gateway to understanding God himself, leading to delight."¹

—Augustine Pagolu

DAY 5

READ:

Nehemiah 8:13-18

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 8:13-18

NOTES

I come from a camping family. Every summer of my young life, we would pack up my grandmother's camper with sheets, cooking gear, and half our refrigerator of food, ready to spend a week at our favorite state park. We'd ride bikes, hike, build fires, and play cards. The camper was old and dry-rotting, but it kept the rain off and provided us with a quarter-thickness bed at night. We loved every minute of it.

As a young newlywed, my husband and I picked up the camping banner and started taking canoe/camping trips with friends. Instead of a camper, we'd grab a tent and some sleeping bags, packing freeze-dried meals and a tarp to put up in case it rained. A few years later, we took our first "big" camping trip with friends, hitting several national parks in the southwest. Packing gear and food for six adults took many conversations and spreadsheets, but we all made it home with memories to last for years.

Each camping trip presents its own challenges, particularly when rain, cold, wind, or bugs make everyone miserable. But the isolated struggle draws us back to a simpler time; the daily concerns of "normal" life fall away, and the comfort of a hot bowl of oatmeal over a campfire seems like a luxury. We dream about the future while talking in the tent at night, laughing at the adventures of the day and excited for the next one tomorrow.

Stepping away from modern comforts and intentionally choosing to live in tents might seem like a nightmare to some, but I bet the ancient Jews would agree with me: it's a great change of pace. And for those who celebrated the Festival of Booths for the first time in generations, we can only imagine the similar excitement to step away from normal life, recall the faithfulness of their God, and hope for the future.

What would it look like for you to step away from normal life and take time to reflect and dream with the Lord?

GROUP

NOTES

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."²

—John Stott (1921-2011)

POINT 1: God's people gather to hear the Word of the Lord (Neh. 8:1-8).

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #5: AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Since the Bible is the _____ Word from God, God's special revelation to humanity, the Bible is the ultimate standard of authority for the Christian. Because it is _____ 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 _____ and _____ God by believing and obeying His Word.



What are some ways we submit to the authority of God's Word?

Those who _____ the Word of the Lord are _____ and worship God.

POINT 2: God's people display the joy of the Lord (Neh. 8:9-12).

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



Why should conviction of sin result in our joy?

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



How can we live so that our joy as believers in Christ can be seen by others for the glory of God?

POINT 3: God's people unite to obey the commands of the Lord (Neh. 8:13-18).

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

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



What are some reasons we might fail to recognize the privilege we have to read and hear God's Word?

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.

- **HEAD:** What impact does God's Word have in your life? How do you know?
- **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:** Who in your life needs to hear the Word of God this week? How will you share it with them?

NOTES

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."³

—Bede (c. 673-735)