

NEHEMIAH'S WATER GATE

Nehemiah 8

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“When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion...Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, ‘This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.’ And all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of

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food and to celebrate with great joy, for they now understood the words that had been made known to them. On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: ‘Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths’—as it is written. So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great. Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.’ (Ezra 7:73–8:18, NIV).

There is a division between chapters 6 and 7. The first 6 chapters deal with construction of the wall and construction of gates. We have suggested that this is a parable of our own life, that often life has left us defenseless, victimized by the tyrants of our past. The walls are down in our personality and as well because the gates are down, the gates represent the place of access and the place of authority where the city counsel sat.

If the gates are down then we are stripped of authority and we do not have control over our destiny. Christ has come to restore the walls of our life and to make us sit in the gates in the place of authority in Him.

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As we see Christ at work building anew in us we will find as we saw in the early 6 chapters the Sanballats and Tobiahs will mock us as we begin to build, when Christ begins to erect His kingdom in us. But we cannot take the Sanballats and Tobiahs in our life lying down. If there's anything I've learned from Nehemiah it is we simply have to repudiate what the Sanballats and Tobiahs are saying to us and we have to repudiate it out of the Word of God.

When the Sanballats and Tobiahs say to us in our defenseless life, "You're stupid!" We say, "We have the mind of Christ. How can we be stupid?"

When they say to us—those inner voices that remind us of our worthlessness and our poor self-image "You're no good," we respond "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son for me. How then can I be no good?"

When the haunting visage of the adolescent years comes back to bring the memory to us that we are ugly then "If anyone is in Christ you're a new creature. The old has passed away. The new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Take that!

When that tempter, that Sanballat or Tobiah tells to us, "You can't lay aside secret sin. You know you'll never get control over that. That wall in your life will always be down. That gate of authority will always be in disrepair." We repeat back the word of Scripture, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

We've got to come to a point where we in the Lord refuse to continue to accept that word of Sanballat and Tobiah which tells us you cannot lay aside secret and besetting sins.

When Sanballat and Tobiah tell us "You cannot change. You're locked in the box of other people's expectations and you can't break out of it," we must say "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory—not the defeat, but the victory—through Jesus Christ our Lord."

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When, our accusers say, “You’re inferior and you’re going to fail,” we reply, “How can we be that because we have been called as ambassadors for Christ. He who began a good work in us shall complete it.”

I have taken these 6 chapters today kind of recapping what Nehemiah has meant to me. In the next year and a half as a pastor and a church we’re going to face tremendous challenge as we enter into a building program. We must always remember the fundamental building is the building of people not the construction of facilities. Sometimes we can get the roles confused. After we come out of the next three years of a major relocation and building, I believe God is going to help us all to come out younger, better, keener, not weary and stooped and bent with the load of the labor, but victorious in the Lord.

Then there’s always that fear of disgrace. The devil likes to quote Scripture. He says, “Whoever builds a tower let him set down first and count the cost” (Luke 14:28). You can keep counting the cost so much that you never build the tower. There’s a point at which Satan himself can pervert that Scripture. There’s a point of reckless faith which the Lord is addressing, but the devil can so warp the Scripture that you must be responsive to what the Lord did when the devil warped the Scripture in the temptation. He quoted it to the Lord: “The angels will take charge of you” (Matthew 4:6). The Lord quoted another Scripture back. When we have done all the work of counting the cost and taking the proper safeguards, if the enemy then tries to say anything, we’re going to have to say, “Without faith it’s impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). And let it stand at that.

I believe in all of our life we can take authority in the name of the Lord. In Nehemiah’s day walls were up. Then we begin in chapter 7 when the walls are up. It’s not enough for the walls to

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simply be up and a work done. It's important for the continuation of the quality of life within those walls. That's what the later part of Nehemiah addresses.

I want to again discard the notion that when a church relocates in a more spacious facility that that is sufficient. That is not sufficient. It simply means we have more room. What you must have above all things is the anointing of the Spirit of God for walls without the presence of the life of the Spirit in the midst of the people of God are useless.

Nehemiah recognizes this when he has Ezra come in and when he refreshes them and sustains the people with the Word of God. It's going to be the sustaining power of God's Word in our lives that marks continued refreshment. God wants us to be like an oasis to other people who are out in the world and thirsty for a drink of the water of life.

Nehemiah 8 tells us the marks of a spiritually alive people who get inside the walls. This is a fantastic chapter. It tells us right off the bat that...

I. One of the marks of a spiritually alive person or people is a deep desire for the Word of God, 8:1–4.

We must remember that the people in the year 445 B.C., twenty-four centuries before us, did not have written copies of the Scripture such as we have in our possession. In fact many of the copies of the Scripture that were in scrolls had been lost in the destruction of Jerusalem only a century and a half before Nehemiah. Were it not for the fact that there were some people who were concerned by the Holy Spirit for the preservation of the Word of God there would have been no Word of God to read by Ezra in Nehemiah.

But Nehemiah in Babylon had kept preserved, handed down from his ancestors in the tribe of Levi, the Word of God. That word was not in a written form generally accessible to the people. It was not something they read every day. It was something which had to be read to them. It is at

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the point now where the wall has been built and it is time to reinstruct the people of God in the Word.

They set a time and place. Verses 7:73–8:1 tell us a little of the sequence of the Book of Nehemiah because it says, “When the seventh month came...all the people assembled.” When we go back to 6:15 we find that the wall itself was completed on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, which is the sixth month of the year, or corresponding to our August-September. This means of all things that they were building the wall in fifty-two days in the months of July and August. The hottest time of the year. They finished on the twenty-fifth day and five days later they have set an assembly to hear the Word of God. Now they’re in a protected place and able to drink in.

The Scripture says they assembled as one man. How does one man assemble? The only thing I could come up with is when one man assembles, all of him is there. Therefore there is this sensitivity that the people have that when there is that public proclamation of the Word of God all of them feel a part of being there. If any one of them is absent then the whole community is not really assembled.

Men, women and children were there. The phrase “all who were able to understand” (verse 2) simply means the children who were able to comprehend what was being communicated.

Ezra had come back thirteen years before Nehemiah has returned. For the first time in Scripture we begin to get a development of something that has been part of the synagogue and part of the Christian church for all these centuries, someone taking a text of Scripture and expounding upon it. This is different from the ministry of the prophets who prophesied freely, often referring, of course, to the word that had gone before them. But here was the beginning of what we now know

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as the proclamation or preaching of the word. A scribe, a student taking a text of Scripture, reading it and having that word expounded.

These people's desire for the word of God is seen in the fact that they gave concentrated attention to what was going on. They were here from the rising of the sun until noon. That's six solid hours. They must have risen in the dark to even get there, to be there for the beginning of the word when the sun arose. The Scriptures say they listened attentively. What a deep desire and hunger that just the quantity of time is reflected in that.

We've all been in meetings in which the proclamation of the Word of God hasn't particularly interested us. It's easy to go away from such a meeting and say, "He didn't have anything to say today. He didn't speak to me at all." The Lord said to me, "Each one of the persons may not have the refinement to say it and may not have the capability yet to say it as it ought to be. But each one of them I have spoken to. If you will just glue yourself down and pay extra special attention you'll learn from each one that speaks." From that day on I don't think there's been one that God hasn't spoken to me in some way through that message.

I think there's this kind of thing that's going on in the Book of Nehemiah. It doesn't seem all that exciting for some person to be standing up on a wooden stage reading copies of the law. Then there are Levites out in the crowd telling them what it means. It almost seems confusing. Yet there is kind of a vacuum-cleaner mentality on the spiritual level of the people that were gathered. A hunger for God's Word. It's amazing how when the hunger is there the worst exposition of the Word of God comes with power.

Certainly a mark of spiritual aliveness is when we come to this book hungry for what God is saying to us through it and asking Him to create the hunger in us if we do not have it.

II. There's also this element of reverent anticipation.

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Verses 5–6 indicate an attitude by which we approach God’s word. Often our attitude determines what we receive from it. When the scroll is opened the people of God stand. Then Ezra praises God and the people join in. Sometimes in our personal reading of Scripture if the Scripture is not becoming alive to you to the degree your hunger is, one of the ways to really approach the Scripture is not just simply to sit down and open it. But to begin with real prayer and reflection and praise on who God is. And real reverence, asking the Lord and anticipating the Lord that He is going to speak as we open His Word to us.

What a tremendous example in corporate worship as we gather together to come not out of a sense of obligation or duty but out of a sense of the fact that God is speaking to us and we can anticipate His speaking through reverence and praise and worship.

III. Verses 7–8 tell us that another mark of spiritual aliveness in Nehemiah’s Water Gate was understanding the Word of God.

There were Levities, who were present in the crowd, who read from the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

There’s probably two things that this may mean. One is the fact that the law was in Hebrew and many of the people who had been in Babylonian captivity in the course of the seventy years or more had picked up the Chaldean language. Their Hebrew had gotten rusty or was nonexistent because they were sons and daughters of the exiles. So there may have been here by some of the Levites a translation of the Hebrew back into Chaldean language which some of the people spoke. It may be also that the Levites were giving teaching in terms of the applicative sense of the Word of God as they were reading.

There is a pattern when we come to Scripture, sometimes when we read Scripture we do not understand it. All of us have had times when we’ve said of a particular portion of the Word of

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God, “I don’t understand that.” That’s why the Lord put teachers in the Body so that we could understand it.

I think of a New Testament example of the Ethiopian eunuch who was returning from Jerusalem, from a very spiritual place (Acts 8:26–40). He was reading the Word of God as he was leaving and he didn’t understand it. Phillip the deacon came up to him and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I understand unless I have someone tell me what it means?” Phillip told him what it means and he became a believer.

There are moments in our life too as we look individually at the Scripture we may need outside help from teachers in the body of Christ to give us instruction.

There may be simply moments when the Holy Spirit quickens to our heart a particular Scripture and gives us ability to understand it in a personal and applicative sense. It’s one thing to intellectually know the Scriptures. It’s another thing to know in an experiential sense the meaning.

All of us have had instances when the Word of God comes to you at a particular moment and you knew it before but you never understood it until it required some action from you. All of us, if we have come to Christ, have had at least one encounter when the Word of God came to us and Jesus Christ was made alive to us and we responded to that Word that became joy in our hearts.

IV. Another mark of spiritual aliveness is responding from the heart, verses 9–12.

Ezra speaks to the people and when they hear the Word of God they began to weep. They are inconsolable in their weeping. Why? We don’t know the particular portion of the Law they were reading from. If Ezra was reading from those portions of Leviticus and Deuteronomy which dealt with the punishment God would bring upon His people for disobedience, their weeping is

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understandable, because these people had suffered greatly as a result of disobedience to God and perhaps they were thinking of all the missed opportunities and the ruin in life that had come because they were disobedient. So they became overwhelmed with the sensitivity of their responsibility before God for the decrease in their numbers and their influence which had suffered.

This weeping before the Lord indicates a relationship sensitivity to him. It's in contrast to a callused heart. The word spoke to them about their sin and the responsibility they had. There was no scapegoating here. It's easy to scapegoat in respect to what we suffer and say it's all somebody else's fault. If we come to that opinion then we never have genuine repentance from the heart as long as we're trying to put the blame on someone else.

Weeping from within. Accepting responsibility. Then Nehemiah and Ezra do a rather strange thing. Within the context it must have seemed strange. In the middle of these people's weeping, Nehemiah and Ezra forbade them to weep and told them instead they are to rejoice.

The reason for that would have to be from Leviticus 23 which gave the schedule of feasts that were to be a part of every year's experience. There were seven feasts every year and the first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets. It was solemn assembly and there was to be no sorrow on that day because it signaled the great seventh month which included the Day of Atonement and the Feast of the Booths or Tabernacles, a month of rejoicing when the harvest was in and a commemoration of what God had done in the Exodus. The Day of Atonement was the only day it was appropriate to cry; the rest of the month was to be rejoicing.

So they said don't weep at all. Go and enjoy choice food and drinks. Not grieve. "For the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

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That's a powerful word. The joy of the Lord is your strength. A more literal translation of this is the joy of the Lord is your stronghold. That is to say, the joy of the Lord is a refuge shelter into which you run. The idea behind it is that in their weeping the people are concentrating on their own failures and shortcomings. It's so possible for us to concentrate on our own failures and shortcomings and if we are doing that we can never enter the joy of the Lord. How can we have the joy of the Lord when all we see is our own miserable failure? Nehemiah is saying instead of entering into your own misery now, instead of entering into your own shortcomings, enter into the Lord as your stronghold. There is joy.

How do we find our place of refuge and strength? We find it by coming into the Father's joy and not remaining in our own sadness. In John 20:20 the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Just a moment before they had been depressed and hiding for fear of the Jews. But when Jesus comes into the room the whole situation changes.

Paul says in Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). He's writing that from a prison cell. What has he done? He's simply gone into the room of rejoicing, where there is the resurrection and the life, where there is the presence of Jesus.

This is a gloomy era we live in. Problems in government, all the people wondering, "Is the economy going to collapse, are we going to be safe if it crashes?" So what? What a wonderful opportunity for Christians to pool their resources and demonstrate their love for one another.

What a whole new dimension that's going to take in the church.

Rather than entering into the gloominess of the age, enter into the joy of our Lord. When you get down in spirit, slip into the room where the disciples are beholding the risen Lord. Rejoice. The source of our joy does not lie in the amount that we have or don't have in the bank. I hope that your joy is not based upon that. That's not the ultimate source of joy. The ultimate source of joy

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is the knowledge that we are in Christ. That in Christ our sins are forgiven. That we are eternal people. That we have an eternal destiny. That we are God's people and have been given the riches of the personality of God to live out in our life. The joy of the Lord is our stronghold.

When the room we occupy in this world gets a little tight with pessimism and despair and sorrow let's slip out of that room in the spirit and get into the room where the angels are dancing.

Obedience to the word is the last hallmark of spiritually alive people in Nehemiah 8. So many new ideas traffic through our mind each day that vitally important truths may be forgotten. This is what happened in ancient Israel. They forget. They had not been keeping the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the seventh and last feast of each calendar year in the Jewish calendar. It was a time in which the people were to make lean-to shelters or booths—brush arbors—and they were to live in them for a week. It was God's way of saying that every Israeli family should have a one-week vacation and campout. There were even rabbinic provisions for the fact that you had to leave some room between the brush arbor overhead so as you looked up at night you could see the stars. There had to be some opening to remind them of the people of God who had gone through the wilderness, the fact that God brought them into Canaan. You can just imagine when Israel kept this feast what the kids felt like. This had to be the greatest week of the year.

They had just finished the wall and they were in their homes, and who wants to get out of their home for a week living in a brush arbor shelter when you've just got your place done? Who wants to go put up a pup tent in the backyard and live for a week when you've got the convenience of your home inside?

But the Lord knew what this kind of celebration would do for His people in terms of remembering the Exodus and the joy that would come from family participation. Never had this

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feast been completely kept. We know from Kings and Chronicles that there were occasions it was kept but it had never been like it was in Nehemiah's day since the time of Joshua son of Nun. That could have been eight hundred to one thousand years that it had not been kept like this. Everybody did it.

The result of obedience to the Word of God was profound. It released a spirit of tremendous joy. They heard the word and respected the keeping of an Old Testament feast and kept it. James says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:22-24).

Every one of us looks in a mirror everyday. What's the first thing we see? The face needs to be altered. We need to get ready to meet the world. It'd be dumb to look in the mirror and not get out the comb or the washcloth, whichever is appropriate, and go away and not engage in the correction which the mirror is telling us needs to be addressed. We look in the mirror and we are changed as a result of looking in that mirror.

James says this is the person who looks in the perfect law of liberty, the Word of God. He looks and he is changed.

We want to look our best. That's why we look into a mirror. And we want to be our best for the Lord. That's why we look into the mirror of His Word, which tells us how to align our life; and His Spirit hovering over His Word helps us to keep His Word and even when we have those moments of failure stands by us and in us to assure us that we are yet the sons of God.

Marks of spiritual aliveness are a deep desire for God, a reverence with anticipation, an understanding of God's Word and responding from the heart in obedience to the Word.

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This is Nehemiah's Water Gate. When you think of "water gate" I hope instead of the political "Watergate," which afflicted our country, we can instead remember another water gate where people met God and experienced His joy.