



RETURNING AND RESPONDING TO THE WORD

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INTRO:

- God's not just building a wall, he's building/rebuilding a people.
- One of the primary means of building/rebuilding a people is His Word in their lives
- Recapturing life and vitality always involves an attentiveness and obedience to God's Word.

MAIN TEXT:

"All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law 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 teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

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 worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—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 understood what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy 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 holy 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 holy day. Do not grieve."

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." (Nehemiah 8:1-12)

RETURN TO THE WORD :

*"All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to **bring out the Book** of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel." (8:1)*

Responding to the authority of God's Word: "Bring out the Book" (8:1, 5)

- The people demanded that Ezra "bring out the Book..."
- Those who are of God's family are a people who go to God's Word first
- In the midst of struggle, needs, etc., we also "...bring out the Book..."
- The narrative of God's people in His Word is unifying
- God's people are a gathered people, a called-out-together people
- We are being fit together, unified by the Master Builder according to His Word.

*“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.**” (8:5)*

- The people stood, and the image presented in the narrative is one of reverence.
- It was a physical expression of an inward disposition of the heart where they placed themselves under the authority of God’s Word
- We do so because God’s Word had the power to break strongholds and bring healing, renewal, or both.

The Priority of God’s Word: Listen Attentively to the Book (8:2-3, 8)

*“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.**” (8:2-3)*

- Listening attentively, with a heart to ingest God’s Word, leads to character and perseverance.
- It also stimulates appetite where we need to hear God’s Word.
- Whoever has your ear, the words that you attend to, will have great influence in your life. So it is with God’s Word.

“They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.” (8:8)

“...my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.” (Hosea 4:6a)

- There’s a proportionality between our knowledge of God’s Word and the strength of our faith
- When you come to know God in His Word, your faith grows and strengthens. It goes beyond head knowledge and becomes a settled matter of the heart. To know God is to trust Him, and He’s given us His Word, along with His Spirit, that we might know Him.

“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people...” (Ephesians 1:17-18)

*“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: **Preach the word**; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:1-5)*

- What you take into yourself becomes part of you, whether last night’s dinner, or God’s Word
- God nourishes our soul as His Word dwells in us
- We never want to underestimate the power God’s Word has to strengthen us

“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” (Colossians 3:16)



Illustration: Museum of the Bible, Illuminations Exhibit

The shelved yellow books represent almost 1900 languages into which the Bible has yet to be translated. There are more than 250 organizations translating the Bible, but despite their efforts, at the current rate it would take more than 100 years to accomplish this goal. The museum’s founders raised \$58 million for the effort, and brought together the top ten organizations to encourage cooperation and resource-sharing. Now the goal is within reach by 2023.

RESPOND TO THE WORD:**Convicted by the Truth**

"Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy 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." (8:9)

"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." (Psalm 51:10-12)

- It's a sin in our culture to believe in sin, but people still know that something is wrong with them.
- The Word of God says, "Here's the issue and here's the cure." "Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more." (Rom. 5:20)
- The conviction of the Spirit of our guilt through God's Word is meant for restoration and redemption
- It's never meant for us to wallow in shame. It's meant to invite grace.
- Conviction is meant to move us towards a God who washes sin and guilt away, restoring us
- Conviction is not an abiding, haunting sense of shame, but an existential realization that something is wrong in me. It is the precursor to grace.

Applying the Truth

*"Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, **for the joy of the Lord is your strength.**" (8:10)*

"When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, Lord God Almighty." (Jeremiah 15:16)

"Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him." (John 9:35-38)

- There is a strong cultural tide in our society that resists absolutes.
 - Truth claims which offer certainty are most often met with suspicion.
 - "My truth" or "your truth" displaces "the truth".
 - Jesus offers himself as the only truth. The truth Jesus offers is motivated by love. The character and motive of the person who makes truth claims is important.
 - Doubt doesn't displace truth. Doubt can lead us to Jesus if we're willing to give him a chance.
- In Jesus there is joy amidst circumstances that would dictate otherwise.
- When we attend to the His Word, we see Jesus, we share His joy, and we worship Him.

Illustration: [The Moravians](#)

The Moravian people were known as "The Happy People." Why? Two reasons. They were a very small community, but their great joy was to serve as missionaries. As a community, they conducted a 100 year prayer meeting, continually praying for workers to go out in the harvest. Some even sold themselves into slavery so they could reach enslaved people. The second reason was their joyful dispositions within the most trying circumstances. One example of their piety and joy happened on a trans Atlantic crossing. A small group of Moravian missionaries shared that voyage with John Wesley. Even though he was an ordained Anglican Pastor, he was astonished by the peaceful, joyful worship of the Moravians in the midst of the storm. He realized that they had something he didn't: joy and peace which strengthened and steadied them in the worst circumstances. That realization led him on a quest with ended in his [conversion at Aldersgate](#).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think of the Bible? How has your opinion changed over time?
2. How do you think your opinion differs, if it does, from that of people in the broader culture?
3. Why is your view of the Bible different, if it is, and how did you come by it?

4. What's your go-to source when you're in trouble? If it's not th Bible, why not? (No judgment, srsly, none :D)
5. How do you identify with the people in Nehemiah 8, who experienced a return to God's Word?
6. What do you think of the idea that God's Word exercises real authority over Jesus followers? Is that an uncomfortable thought? If so, why?
7. Have you ever seen the Bible used abusively to control people? If so, how did you respond? Did it change the way you view God's Word and if so, how?
8. How do you relate the authority of God's Word and its promise to impart life?
9. What does it mean to attend to God's word? What's that look like for you?
10. How do the ideas of taking God's Word seriously and being soul-nourished by it relate?
11. Talk about the joy of obedience, how the joy that we experience in God is connected to our obedience to what His Word teaches. How do we do that in a way that is generous and life-giving?