

# People of the Book

*Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

By Ty Blackburn

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** Nehemiah 8:1-8  
**Preached on:** Sunday, April 18, 2021

**Providence Church**  
2146 Buford Hwy  
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

**Website:** [www.providenceduluth.org](http://www.providenceduluth.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch](http://www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch)

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the eighth chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 8. We continue our exposition of the books Ezra/Nehemiah which we take to be one book originally, it was in the Hebrew Old Testament, it is one book, as Ezra/Nehemiah, later was separated into two. And so we've been expositing it for some time now and we are nearing, we're getting closer to the end. It's like, you know, in conclusion, something a pastor says when he has 20 minutes left to talk.

Well, anyway, so we are in Nehemiah 8 today. We come to a pivotal passage in the book, in fact, it's a pivotal passage and has been recognized as such even among the Jewish people who have missed the Messiah. They recognize this passage and the ministry of Ezra as a profound watershed moment in the history of God's dealing with his people. This passage and Ezra's ministry himself, I mentioned this a little bit when we were looking at, because what's going to happen, we're in Nehemiah 8 but Ezra comes back on the scene. Remember, Ezra had returned in the second return. Remember, the book of Ezra/Nehemiah deals with three returns of the people of Israel from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem. It happened in three installments, the first in 538 BC, and then the second ended up in 536 BC when they're actually starting rebuilding the altar, 536 BC, the second return happened under Ezra's leadership in 458 BC, and the goal was to restore the law of God to the people of God. The third return happens in 445 BC under the ministry and leadership of Nehemiah and the goal of this return is to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And we see how these books, Ezra/Nehemiah, organized around these three returns, the people of God returning from exile to be the people of God, and in a very real sense, they are setting out for the Jews who would follow and for us today as we look back at it, how do the people of God live in the midst of a dark world that is opposed to who we are? How do we live under the reign and rule of kingdoms that are opposed to the gospel, and this is the overarching theme of the book to show God's people how to live, and Ezra comes back on the stage. He was front and center from Ezra 7 to 10, but then in Nehemiah we've been looking just at Nehemiah and the people there and Ezra has been there all this time but he's not been in the forefront and he comes back into the forefront in this chapter, and he comes back to preach the word, to read the word and to preach the word of God, and the reason that the Jewish people recognize this as a watershed moment is they look at this moment and they realize that this is the moment in history that the people of Israel went from being a people of the temple to being a people

of the book, and that's the title of the message this morning, "A People of the Book," or "People of the Book." This is what we are called to be as well, people of the book.

Ezra comes back and restores the law of God to the people of God. These three returns, remember, as we've looked at them, we see that they each had particular focus. The first was to rebuild the temple, the first return under Zerubbabel in 536 BC was to rebuild the temple. That is, how did the people of God live in the midst of an oppressive time in which the kingdoms of this world are opposed to the kingdom of his Christ? How do we live? How should we live? Well, we need to put worship at the center. That's what rebuilding the temple was about. That's what it teaches us, that we are to build our lives around worship, that all of life for the people of God is to be about worship. That's how we live in the midst of a dark world. You make your life about worshipping God not just on Sunday but all of the time you put worship at the center. The second return was about Ezra restoring the law of God and so there are some initial reforms that he makes but those reforms are not fully carried out, and so we see the need for the third return under Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to protect the worship of God, to protect the people of God. And so we've seen that this idea of making holiness a priority, that the walls and the emphasis in Ezra, the last part of Ezra and Nehemiah is to be separate and distinct from the nations. Though we are in the world, we're not to be of the world. We're to be different. We're not to be like those who are around us, the ungodly.

So that's what was happening in the book of Nehemiah, Ezra/Nehemiah, they were trying to make the people of God to live differently in the midst of the nations that surrounded them, and so this pivotal point in the history of God's people, becoming a people of the book, and it's really important when you remember that Ezra/Nehemiah is at the very end of the Old Testament canon. It doesn't come at the back of your Old Testament canon because the prophets come afterwards, but historically this is the end of the historical record given in the Old Testament. It's very likely the last book written. The only other possibility realistically, in my view, is Malachi might have been written after Ezra because Malachi was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. So Ezra/Nehemiah was likely the last book, if it wasn't, Malachi was written about the same time but the canon is closing and so the people of God are about to experience for the first time in 1,100 years since Moses began, or almost 1,100 years, certainly over 1,000 years. Moses began giving the word of God in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They'd had an unbroken succession of prophets. God has been speaking through those who came after them, men like Joshua, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, all of the different prophets that God has raised up throughout the history of the nation. They were men speaking the word of God and now at the closing of the canon, there's going to be 400 years of silence. There are no prophets that are going to be speaking between 400 and the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist.

So the last words before the silence is what you have here in Ezra/Nehemiah, last instructions. This is how you are to live during these periods of darkness, spiritual darkness. It's so relevant to us because they were living under Persian hegemony, remember they were taken captive by the Babylonians and taken as slaves into Babylon but now than when Persia conquered Babylon, the Persians let them go back to Jerusalem

but they're not their own country, they are a colony, they're a province, a tiny province in the great Persian Empire and the Persian Empire is not a godly Empire, it's a godless Empire. Even though the Lord has moved the hearts of the kings again and again to favor God's people at different moments in wondrous ways, these men are not believers. And as the canon is closing, here they are wondering what is going to happen going forward, how are we to live, is God ever going to bring back the glory, are we going to have the days of David again? And the answer is, no. The Lord is through building earthly kingdoms until Jesus comes back. Not even his first coming is going to be about building an earthly kingdom. What did Jesus say? "My kingdom is not of this world." God is showing he's building a spiritual kingdom, he's transforming lives or transforming people one life at a time through the gospel, and he's teaching them this even here because they're going to go from Persian domination to Greek domination. The Greek Empire defeats the Persians and then the Jews are going to experience a lot of suffering at the hands of the godless Greek rulers, particularly one who is almost the embodiment of evil, a guy named Antiochus Epiphanies who is an amazing approximation of the antichrist and he's described in Daniel 11. Antiochus, a wicked man. So the Jews deal with that and then after the Greeks, not long after the Greeks, the Romans come with their oppressive reign and when you look at the visions of Daniel in chapter 2 and chapter 7 of Daniel, the Roman rule was worse than all of the ones that came before pictured in the dreadful terrifying beast of Daniel 7. Those four kingdoms, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, are pictured as terrible beasts but the fourth is much more dreadful and terrifying, that's the Roman Empire.

So the message is you're going to be under the reign of oppressive kingdoms that are opposed to the gospel. How should you then live? That's the question. How do you live in difficult and dark days under the reign of hostile regimes, oppressive systems? What are the people of God called to be and do? That's the message of this book, Ezra/Nehemiah, and we come now to a passage that shows that the way that we are to live, the way that we are to bear up under difficult times, in dark times, is we are to become a people of the book. We need to be increasingly people of the book, the word of God. This is what the Lord is putting before us.

So let's read Ezra 8, we're going to focus on verses 1 to 8, but we'll read verses 1 to 12. Sorry, Nehemiah. Nehemiah 8. If you hear me say Ezra 8, you won't recognize what we're going to start reading. Nehemiah 8.

1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. 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 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. 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. 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, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. 9 Then 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 were weeping when they heard the words of the law. 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 celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Our Father, we ask this morning that You would create in us a hunger for the word of God and that, then, You would satisfy that hunger by feeding us with Your word. And we acknowledge, Lord, that only Your Spirit and only Your grace can that, so we ask that You might do this for Your glory, for the honor and praise of Your precious Son, and we pray this in His name. Amen.*

So people of the book. How are we to live? We're to be people of the book. This is actually an amazing example of revival and spiritual awakening. This passage describes what would be rightly called a revival or spiritual awakening. A revival biblically is a return of the life of God to the people of God. That's what "revive" means. It's a sovereign act of God where he quickens the people of God and gives life to them. Many of you may have grown up, like I did, a revival was a meeting planned on a certain date when you had a guest speaker come into your church, but that's not biblically what a revival is. A revival is a sovereign act of God. You can't plan it, it is done by the Spirit of God. You can pray for it, you can seek it, but only God can give it. And this is truly a revival and spiritual awakening. The hand of God is all over the people of God in this passage, in the same way that the hand of God has been over Ezra and Nehemiah and they speak of that as the passage that we've read previously. "God's hand was upon me," Ezra says. Nehemiah, "The hand of God was upon me." And now the hand of God is upon the people of God in this pivotal moment in their history.

So we see in this something of how God brings about revival and spiritual awakening and that happens when the people of God become a people of the book. In fact, as you look at careful student of church history sees this, that every great movement of God in history that was truly a great movement of God has always been facilitated by a revival, first, of the preaching of the word of God. The people have to recover the book and it's the word of God that goes forth and imparts life. This is the reality and we see in this passage this lived out before us and that which became a defining moment in the life of God's people. This was something that the Reformers came to look at and understand during the Reformation and after the Reformation, to see that God always intended the people of God to be instructed in the word of God. That's why you get together for worship.

It's interesting, I mentioned how there's the movement from them being a people of the temple. Now they still go to the temple, the temple is a key part of their worship until Jesus fulfills the temple in his death and resurrection, then the temple is no more. It has lost its value, Jesus is the temple, but until he comes, the temple has a central place, after all, they rebuilt it. It needed to be rebuilt but what we're seeing here is that temple is not enough, it's the word of God which brings life. In the same way that the psalmist says in Psalm 33:6, that it is through the word of the Lord the heavens were made, think about that. God spoke. That's how he created. Go back to Genesis 1 and the way God created, I mean, he shows us there in the very first pages of Scripture. He tells us the earth was formless and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep, the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Then God said, "Let the waters below be separated from the waters above." Then God said, "Let the dry land appear." Then God said, "Let the land bring forth animals." God said, "Let the heavens be filled." God said. God said. God said.

God is glorified in expressing his miraculous power through his spoken word. This is his way and so the people of God are coming to understand that in a fresh and new way in the ministry of Ezra in this moment in history. The Lord intends us to be a people of the book. In a hostile world, society so often in the ebb and flow of history moves from more hospitable to less hospitable but never embracing the gospel, never embracing the people of God, not truly because the world cannot love the light. It hates the light. So how are the people of God to be the people of God? How are the people of God to honor the Lord? How are the people of God to make it in the world? What are they to focus on? We are to focus on being people of the book. That's what we're called to be, people of the book. Not because we are just trying to understand a system of thought. No. No, this book is a living book. This book is a powerful book. When we read and understand this book, it is the word of the living God going forth. The word of God is alive, the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:12. The word is living and active. It's not a series of propositions to be merely entertained. It is propositional. We're going to see that it is to be understood with the mind but it is not merely intellectual arguments. It is that but it is so much more than merely that, it is the power of God. It is the same word that created the world goes forth in the proclamation, preaching, understanding and submission to the word of God.

So we want to look at this morning to help us unpack this passage, Nehemiah 8:1-8, two points. For us to be people of the book, for us to live for God's glory in the midst of our day, how do we do that? We must be people of the book and the first thing we need to be people of the book, the first point is we need a divinely inspired hunger for the word. What we see here is a divinely inspired hunger for the word. The hand of God is at work. There is a supernatural hunger for the word and as we look carefully at the text, we see this made plain right before us. It's something that we can miss if we're not reading carefully but it's obvious once you start to ponder it and look at it.

The hand of God is at work in the people of God, giving them a divinely inspired hunger for the word. We see it, first of all, in verse 1 in the unity of the people, "And all the people gathered as one man." All the people gathered as one man. All the people come together as one man. This phrase echoes the same exact wording or virtually identical wording, not quite exact but virtually identical wording in the Hebrew in Ezra 3:1, and we looked at this last time but just to remind you, Ezra 3:1 is describing an event that happened 91 years to the day before the events we're reading about in Nehemiah 8. And in Ezra 3:1, that first return in 536 BC, we're told that, "Now when the seventh month came," this is Ezra 3:1, "Now when the seventh month came," now this is 536 BC, "when the seventh month came and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem." We're told later in verse 6 that this was the first day of the seventh month. When you turn back over to Ezra, I'm sorry, Nehemiah 8... You see how confusing this is. Nehemiah 8 is about Ezra, but to find out what happened we have to go back to Ezra. Anyway. You look back to verse 73 of chapter 7, the last part of chapter 7:73 says, "And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities. And all the people gathered as one man." You see almost exactly the same wording.

So 91 years later history is repeating itself, 91 years to the day. In Ezra 3, on that day, the first day of the seventh month, 536 BC, they gathered together as one man and they rebuilt the altar of God and they offered sacrifices for the first time in a generation, and for the first time in a generation true worship happened again. What a monumental moment, a moment of such exceedingly great joy. The people of God are back in the land of God worshipping God again. Now 91 years later after that moment, a part of this third return, Nehemiah has come back, they've rebuilt the walls, they've finished just in time so that when the seventh month came, after they finished the walls, they clearly went back to their own cities because verse 73 says, "And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities. And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate." And verse 2 tells us it was on the first day of the seventh month.

So they gathered together as one man and here instead of the beginning of worship as it was 91 years before, here it is the full restoration of the word of God, the greatest experience of the word of God that we really have recorded. The one that would approximate it and I think you might argue is equal to it would be when God gave the law of God through Moses in Exodus 19 to 24, and for the Jews, Ezra is regarded as a second

Moses, the second lawgiver, because he gives the law of God back to the people of God after the exile in these words that we're reading today.

But the unity shows this divine handiwork, that God has inspired the people to come as one man. In fact, that unity is seen in a key phrase repeated in this passage 10 times and the phrase is "all the people." You probably heard it as we were reading it, 10 times in 12 verses the phrase "all the people." Verse 1, "And all the people gathered as one man." Verse 3, "He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from 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." Look at verse 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." You see it in verses 6 as well, "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." So all the people said, "Amen, Amen," and all the people bowed low and worshiped. In verse 9, "Then 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 were weeping when they heard the words," read.

So all of the people. There's a sense in which the whole community has turned out. God has put his Spirit on all the people and they are there, and we see it not only in the unity but in the request that's made. Look at verse 1, "all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law." They said, "Bring out the book." The people gather as one man and they say, "Please bring out the book."

And the makeup of the crowd, he's emphatic about that. It was the assembly of men, women, verse 2, and all who could listen with understanding. It's notable, first of all, that women are included in this gathering. In the providence of God, in the revelation of the word of God over time, the festivals that God called the people to come to, to Jerusalem every year, the men were required to come, not the women, but here we're told that the women have gathered there as well at this day which happens to be a festival day. It's not called out to us right away, it's going to become clear that this is a part of the holy days of Israel. The seventh month itself has got three significant festivals in it and it sets it apart as the largest time of worship that's devoted in the whole Hebrew calendar. The seventh month Tishri was usually September/October is when it falls. The first day of the month is the Feast of Trumpets. The 10th day of the month is the Day of Atonement. And the 15th day of the month and then for a week is the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. So the Jews reading these words, they know the seventh month's the holy days and the holy days began with the Feast of Trumpets which leads into a time of somber reflection leading up to Yom Kippur on the 10th day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement, and then after that, the next week we will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths.

So this incredibly holy time, all the people are there, and given this seventh month, we're not surprised to find that the women, men and children are involved. In fact, this is a fulfillment actually, a wonderful fulfillment of something that we'll find out later as we

read the text, that had not happened since the days of Joshua but it was supposed to happen every seven years. If you turn to Deuteronomy 31, Deuteronomy, the second giving of the law, the last book of Moses, this chapter are some of the last words of Moses before he dies. He tells them at the beginning he's 120 years old today. "I'm not going to go into the Promised Land with you to possess it. The Lord has told me I can't go in." But he gives them instruction about how they're to handle the seventh month and the Feast of Tabernacles and this is kind of being blended together, we see in Nehemiah 8. Look at verse 9, Deuteronomy 31:9, "So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel." So he's talking to the priests, he's talking to the Levites. You remember who's standing beside Moses on the platform and who's out in the crowd talking to the people? Priests and Levites. This is what Moses says to them more than a thousand years, right at a thousand years or 950 years before the events we're reading.

"Then Moses commanded them," verse 10, and said, "At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths," Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of Booths, the seventh month, "when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose," Jerusalem, "you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing." I want you every seven years, you celebrate the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles every year, but every seven years there's to be a special festival when the women do come, and not only the women but the children come, and I want you to read this law to them.

"Assemble the people," verse 12, "the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess." This passage is beautifully fulfilled, the first recorded example of it in Scripture in this text right here. God has put on the hearts of the people to do that which, I think, they don't even understand. They're probably going to hear it preached in this preaching that they hear which is amazing. Part of this, the wonder of the supernatural reality of what's going on is this service lasts five to six hours, at least four. Early morning to noon. We might have a debate over what constitutes early-morning, some of us would have different opinions about that, right? But the idea is sunrise to midday, my guess is five hours, 7 AM to 12 noon. The service started at 7, it ended at 12. The people stood and heard the law of the Lord for five hours. Nobody is looking at their watch. Nobody is complaining. That's a divinely inspired hunger.

But men, women and all who could listen. In fact, that's emphasized twice in the passage. Verse 2, back to Nehemiah 8, "Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men," Nehemiah 8:2, "brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month." Verse 3, "He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from 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." Everyone is paying attention, men, women and children. So the word of God is for all of God's people. All of God's people need to



be under the word of God, even children, from the time they can understand need to be under the preaching of the word, the teaching of the word.

Five hours. We're not going to lengthen our services, in fact, one of the things I'm really concerned about, it does make me feel a little better about how long I preach reading this, but I honestly am prayerfully considering trying to be a little shorter and more timely in the preaching length, moving a little, you try to hit the right balance. But anyway, pray for me for wisdom about that. But what this shows, though, is that God was saying, "Look, for the people of God to be the people of God, we need to be instructed in the word of God." You can't have sermonettes. Someone said sermonettes make Christianettes.

We need the word of God. The word of God is life and so the people of God must have the word of God, and when God's Spirit begins to make the people of God know they must have the word of God, that's such an encouragement because we know the Spirit of God has to produce that. And like God says in the Psalms, "Open wide your mouth and I will fill it," when the people of God open wide their mouth and say, "Lord, feed me the word of God."

A divinely inspired hunger, a hunger for the word comes from knowing how much we need the word. This is taught to us so clearly in Scripture and God is trying to teach us in so many ways. Just a couple of things I want to mention here about how this is taught and then we'll talk about some actual passages that show this. But the concept, the first thing God did to man after he created man, he makes man and the first thing he does to man in his sinless state, man has not sinned, man's mind is not darkened, man is everything God made him to be but man still needs the word of God because the first thing God does after he makes man is he speaks to man, that is, man even before he sinned could not make sense, full sense of himself and his place in the world without the word of God. That's how desperately we need the word. God made us to need his word.

It's taught to us in a wonderful way, Deuteronomy 8 makes this clear. Jesus quotes this. Remember in Matthew 4:4 when Jesus is tempted by the devil, he's fasted for 40 days, 40 days have ended, he has now become hungry again and Satan says to him, "If You were the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." And Jesus responds to Satan with the Scripture. Every time Jesus responds to temptation with the Scripture. Isn't that amazing? He's God but the man Christ Jesus takes the word of God and what does he say that first time that tells you so much about his own life as a man? Satan says, "Turn these stones into bread if You're the Son of God." And Jesus says, "Man shall not live by bread alone. It is written. It is written, man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God." Every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, and he's quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, and in Deuteronomy 8, it's really interesting, Moses teaches the people in that early chapter of Deuteronomy and says, "Listen, the reason God gave you manna from heaven, do you know what it was?" Well, we were hungry, we had no food. That was a good reason. "Yeah, that was a good reason but that wasn't the reason God allowed you to need manna from heaven. There was a bigger reason than just feeding you." You had to be fed but he could have just made stuff come out of the

ground. He could have had people come and bring you food. He could have had food trucks show up. God could have done that. It's not too hard for him. What did he do? He fed them from heaven. Every morning they got up and they picked up the manna and they made it into something to eat. They were getting food from heaven every day and Moses says this, "The Lord tested you in the wilderness and he fed you with manna from heaven so that you might know that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In the same way you need daily bread, you need the word of the living God. You cannot survive without it and Jesus as the God-man living a fully human life, he says to Satan, "Man does not live by bread alone." Jesus himself was living by the word of God, meditating on Scripture, living a true human life thought he's fully God, he inspired the word. How does this work? How do you compute this? It's beyond our ability to fully understand but that's what we see as we look at Scripture. He lived a fully human life and he says, "I live by the word of God as a man."

So we need the word of God. It's everything. You think about what the Bible says the word of God does for us. 1 Peter 1:23 says that you were born again by the living and abiding word of God. That new birth, if we need to be born again, which the Bible says we do and Jesus said you must be born again to Nicodemus. Nicodemus had an understanding of the word but he didn't have a real right understanding of the word and therefore he had not been born again and Jesus says, "Listen, you who teach Israel, you're missing the point of the Bible. You haven't let the word have its true fruit in your life, its efficacy in your life. You need to be born again." But how can I be born again? 1 Peter 1:23 says, well, even the new birth comes through the word of God. 1 Peter 1:23, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God."

You wonder if you're a true believer, what do you do about that? Do you just wait? Do you just pray? Well, you should pray but you pray and you read the word. You pray and you sit under the word. You pray and you cling to the word because it is the word that brings life. It is the word which causes new birth. In fact, there's a beautiful picture of this in 2 Corinthians 4:6. I mentioned how the word of God is how he created. He created the universe. Paul makes this connection in 2 Corinthians 4:6. He's talking about the reality of what we have now received in Christ and he says in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' God who said let there be light, "is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." God looked into the darkness, the primordial darkness and he said, "Let there be light," and there was light and God looks into the darkness of the human heart and he says, "Let there be light," and there is light and that light comes through this book, the word of God. When the Spirit of God accompanies the proclamation or the reading or the study of the word of God with his life-giving power, he uses this instrument. There's no other way to be born again apart from the Spirit with the word. We must have the Spirit, yes, but the Spirit, how does he work? What's the sword of the Spirit? It's the word of God.

So the word of God gives us life, makes us alive. In fact, he goes on in the next chapter to say we are, every man who is in Christ is a new creation. You've actually become a new

creation. He's following up on what he said in chapter 4, verse 6. God spoke into your darkness, into your deadness and he made you alive. He made you a completely new creation. That's the power of the word of God. So if the word of God has that kind of power, shouldn't we be hungry for it? It not only has power to give us life, new birth, to increase our faith, Romans 10:17, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." How do you grow in faith when you're struggling with your faith? You read the word. You study the word. You hear the word preached. That's how you grow in faith because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.

It not only increases our faith, it sanctifies us. Jesus said, "Sanctify them in thy truth, thy word is truth." It sets us apart. It makes us holy. It does that by transforming our thinking. Romans 12:2, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The word of God comes in, changes the mind, and thus changes the heart and changes the life and it keeps on doing that. It makes a person alive and then it keeps on doing the work of transformation as you stay in the word. This is why the word is so precious. This is why we need the word so much. And God must create in us that hunger and we need to be seeking that hunger, and one of the ways that you help that hunger grow is by being in the word. You acquire a taste for the word. Even as you've become a believer, you now have a taste when you become a child of God. 1 Peter, the passage we just read in verse 23 from chapter 1 that said we're born again by imperishable seed, that is, the enduring word of God. He goes on right after that, he says to the believers there that Peter's writing to, he says, "Put aside all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander, and like newborn babes long for the pure milk of the word so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation."

So long for the word like a baby longs for his mother's milk. That's how you need to long for the word because the word is exactly what you need. It will help you grow to be what God wants you to be. It sanctifies. It transforms. It equips. 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17, in fact, actually verse 14 when Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing that from childhood you've been in the holy Scripture which have been taught to you and are able, the Scripture, being in the Scriptures, continuing in them are able to make you wise unto salvation." Just being in the Bible, being in the word can make you wise unto salvation, you see, because God has chosen, this is his method, this is his means.

He goes on to say after that for the word of God is living, I'm sorry, he says, for all Scripture, this is 2 Timothy 3:16, all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, is God-breathed, and is profitable. It's profitable for four things: for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be equipped, thoroughly furnished for every good work. It equips you for everything that you need to do in your life, that God wants you to do. It doesn't equip you for things that God doesn't want you to do. It doesn't make you able to be, you know, a professional athlete or an astronaut or whatever you might want to do. The word doesn't promise that, it promises to do something far better than that. It promises to show you how to give glory to God in whatever difficult trying circumstance you find yourself in. It shows you how to live to lift up Christ.

So the word of God is adequate for that. So that's the divinely inspired hunger. We need to be hungry because this is what the word is. Second point, we need not only a divinely inspired hunger for the word, we need divinely enabled exposition of the word. The second point: the divinely enabled exposition of the word. To be people of the book, we need the divinely inspired hunger for the word and divinely enabled exposition of the word.

What we have here in our passage in Nehemiah 8, many theologians and Bible interpreters see the birth of expository preaching. This is what's happening here. They're reading the Bible and then they're also explaining the Bible and the goal is understanding. In fact, the word "understand" is a key word in the passage. It occurs four times in the New American Standard that I'm reading and there's a fifth time that it's in a different word but in verse 2, "all who could listen with understanding," verse 3, "those who could understand." Verse 8, "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading." Verse 12, "All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them." The goal of preaching is to produce understanding. The goal of reading, the goal of study, the goal of exposition is understanding. The mind is the means that God works through to bring his life-giving, life-transforming power to bear in the life.

God does not bypass the intellect. There are some people who would teach that. Mystics who believe you don't need to think about it, you just need to feel it. That's not biblical truth. That has nothing to do with the God of the Bible. That's satanic. It may be entertained by sincere people who don't realize that they're being deceived but God works through the mind first. He doesn't end in the mind, it gets the whole heart, it gets the life but it starts in the mind. The prophet Hosea said, "My people perish for a lack of knowledge." You have to grow in knowledge to be changed and knowledge needs to be applied, to be doers of the word, yes, but it starts in the mind.

So we see this emphasis on the word "understand." In fact, it's also there in verse 7. I mentioned there was one other time. When it says they explained the law to the people in verse 7, the Levites explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place, that could be translated helped them understand. Same Hebrew verb, understand.

So it starts with the mind and the text is taken and applied to the mind. In fact, expository preaching just to explain what that is for a moment, expository preaching means to lead out the meaning. It means to start with the text, expository preaching, true expository preaching starts with the text of the Bible. If you hear people say, you know, you need to find a good expository preaching church, what does that mean? Some people will say they do exposition and maybe they do, maybe they don't. What is it that makes exposition, Bible exposition, Bible exposition? Bible exposition starts with the text. It doesn't start with an idea in the mind of the preacher. It doesn't even start with a perceived need in the mind of the preacher of the congregation. It starts with the text of Scripture.

Now you can have a perceived need and preach a topical sermon that then becomes expositional because you actually take the text and clearly lead out the meaning of the text but true exposition and I think the better way to do it and what we see here, is they started reading the book of the law and for five hours they read and expound, read and expound, read and expound. In fact, it's interesting, the wording in verse 8, the New American Standard says, "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading." The other translations, the NIV says they were making it clear. The word "translating," they translate the word "translating," that I mean, the Hebrew word "translating" in the New American Standard. It's a tongue-twister here. The Hebrew word that is in the NASB "translating" is in the NIV "making it clear," in the ESV is "clearly," in the King James is "distinctly." The question is what were they doing? Some people believe that the Jews were speaking Aramaic so much that they had to have the Hebrew Bible translated into their language, but I think in understanding of Nehemiah 13:23 and following would say that, no, the Jews still spoke Hebrew at this point. They later become Aramaic speakers but at this point they still had a basic understanding of Hebrew because Nehemiah is upset that they aren't teaching their kids the language of the people of God in Nehemiah 13.

So I think what's happening here is not translating, it can also have the meaning of to clearly and distinctly set apart and separate, and so the idea is they're clearly explaining each separate section of the text that they read. They're expounding it and that's what Bible exposition is. It starts with the text. It tries to understand a passage in its context, carefully observing the words of the text, thinking about the syntactical relationships, the way the words fit in the sentences, the sentences in the paragraphs, and it seeks to understand, this is the goal of expository preaching, what is the mind of God as revealed in the mind of the human author because God inspires these words to be written. What is the mind of the human author as he pens these words and to lead that out? That's the heart of exposition.

So the text sets the agenda. Do you see that? The difference, that's the difference. Expository preaching, the text sets the agenda for the message, not an idea in the mind of a preacher, and so the effort is made to understand the text on its terms, what was it trying to address, what was it trying to bring to the people of God, and then once you understand that correctly, then you apply that in your context to people of God today. This seems to be what they were doing. They were taking a text of Scripture, they were reading it and then they were applying it. Rightly understanding it, giving the sense of it so that the people then understood it and knew how to apply it. That is in a nutshell and there's so much more to be said about that Bible exposition, and so that the purpose of a particular sermon should be tied to the purpose of the passage.

This is something that I try to think about when I'm studying is what was the mind of God wanting to accomplish in the people of God at the time this word was written down? What was he trying to address? What issue? If I could understand that rightly, then when we unpack the Scripture, there really has a ring of "Thus says the Lord" to the preaching. But if we just go to the Bible with our own ideas and our own prejudices and our own

concerns, we can read the Bible and twist it to our own destruction. Very dangerous thing and we see that and this is what the leaders in the church of God are to be about, just like the folks in Nehemiah's day, those men on the platform with him, taking turns in the reading and preaching and those Levites that were out in the crowd that were going around and helping them think about, "Do you understand this? Do you understand this?" Because there's so many people, they're getting out there among the crowd, answering their questions, helping them apply.

And the most relevant thing in the world at any time in your life is the word of God and that's really the belief behind consecutive expositions. I've seen this through now almost 28 years, that although I haven't been faithful in expository for 28 years, so how many years I've been doing that. First I was a little more topical, I have to confess. Occasional exposition and a lot of topical, but praise God he delivered me from that, and it's amazing to see how relevant the right understanding of the word of God is to life because, after all, it shouldn't be surprising. This is the eternal word of the living God, after all. He knows how to make what happened in 445 BC relevant to your life in 2021 AD. It's not too hard for him and it just takes faith to believe that. So every time you read the word of God, every time you study the word of God, you need to have a heart that says, "Lord, make me hungry for Your word." You need to believe, "Help me believe that this is the living word of God." And as you go to that expectation, open wide your mouth and he will fill it.

How timely the word of God is, how relevant, and people today try to make it relevant. They try to dress it up but they don't give the word and when that happens, that's just such a tragedy, how that must grieve the heart of God, how that must grieve the heart of Jesus. Think about Jesus, his heart for his people. We read today about Peter's denial of Jesus, threefold denial. Isn't that amazing? Remember earlier in the passage Jesus says he's going to be betrayed and Peter says, you know, especially when you put the different gospel accounts together, it's like, "I'll never betray You. I'm willing to die for You." And Jesus here right before the cross with all of that weight of the coming agony, the spiritual agony above everything else, becomes sin, it's hanging right there in front of him and he in his loving shepherding heart tells Peter, "You're going to deny Me three times." He's also told him he tells him later that night, "I prayed for you, Peter."

Peter denies him three times and then we have the gospel of John 21:15-17 where Jesus, one of his post-resurrection appearances before his ascension into heaven. He appeared for a period of 40 days to many people, Paul says up to 500 at one time. Several appearances to his disciples and there as they're out fishing on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus appears. He's cooking fish on the shore. John says to Peter, "It's the Lord." Peter jumps out and swims to the Lord but as he gets there, something happens and John doesn't describe it for us because John's writing this gospel, not Peter, and he says the next thing you know they're eating breakfast, not talking about Peter running up to Jesus or anything, it just says he jumped out and the next thing you know they're eating breakfast.

Then Peter, Jesus wants to talk to Peter and so, "Come for a walk with Me." And they go for a walk and Peter, Jesus asked Peter three times one question, "Peter, do you love

Me?" How those words must have sounded knowing about his denial. "Peter, do you love Me?" But he does love him and he says, "Yes, Lord, I love You." "Feed My Sheep. Peter, do you love Me?" "You just asked me that. Lord, You know that I love You." "Tend My lambs." A few more steps, "Peter, do you love Me?" Peter becomes exasperated. He doesn't know why he keeps asking him. He says, "Lord, You know all things. You know that I love You." And Jesus says, "Feed My Sheep." Three denials, three reaffirmations. Jesus made him say, "Yes, I love You," three times to say we're fully restored. I've forgiven you. He had, as James was talking about earlier, he had godly sorrow that led to repentance and Jesus now having him fully restored says, "What I want you to do is feed My sheep. Give them the word of God. Give them the life-giving, life-transforming power of the word. Do that until I call you home, and if you do that, you're showing how much you love Me."

How can we love Jesus ourselves? We feed one another the word of God. You want to love someone, give them the word. Yeah, you've got to love them and you don't just always just spout off a sermon every time you see somebody, you know, they're hurting and you just start... No, sometimes you mourn with those that mourn, you sit there and you weep with them. You're like Job's friends, the first week they did a really good job, they said nothing for seven days, they just sat with him and commiserated, but then when they opened their mouths, they did not feed Job, they tore him down. So we go in love and wait and then in the right moment feed with the word of God. The right understanding of Scripture spoken and proclaimed is that which gives life, that which changes everything. That's what we have the privilege of doing for one another and that will make all the difference. That will make us equipped. That will make us a people of the book and a people of the book will shine for God's glory in the midst of a dark world. May the Lord help us do that.

Let's go to him in prayer.

*Our Father, how grateful we are for Your word and the sufficiency of Your word, the perfection of Your word, the beauty of Your word, the power of Your word. Lord, just the message of Christ, the word of Christ, the power that it has, Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation." Lord, help us, give us more faith. As we get in the word, keep giving us more faith. Make us more bold in our proclamation of Your word. Make us more earnest in our hunger for Your word. We confess our hearts are so easily dulled, so easily we become complacent. Lord, make us hunger and thirst. And we thank You that You're at work in our lives. You're going to put us in circumstances that make us hungry just like You did the people in Nehemiah's day, You put them in hard circumstances, enemies surrounding them, and through that You birthed in them this hunger for the word of God. So Lord, even as days get darker if that's Your will in our lives, make us more hungry. Help us open wide our mouths and fill them.*

*We pray that, Lord, today there are people here that will repent and place their faith in Jesus Christ, the God-man who is the full revelation of what You are like, Father, who in His perfect life, sinless life, His sacrificial death, His blood shed on behalf of all who*

*would place their faith in Him, taking our sins in His own body on the cross, makes a full sacrifice in payment for sin and He rises from the dead on the third day and lives now fully God, fully man forever, never to die again, and He gives life to those who place their faith in Him and call upon Him. Lord, save, give new birth, and sanctify, transform, and we ask this so that Jesus might be glorified and that You might be pleased. We pray these things in His name. Amen.*