

The Transforming Power of the Preached Word

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Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

By Ty Blackburn

Bible Text: Nehemiah 8:9-12
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Providence Church
2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

I ask you to turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah 8, the eighth chapter of Nehemiah. Turn there for another Sunday. We began this chapter last week and we see in this passage an extraordinary spiritual awakening and revival that God sent to his people 445 years before Christ. In the old covenant before Jesus has come, the word of God informs the people of God and we see this, kind of the birthplace of expository preaching in the ministry of Ezra and the Levites on that day, the first day of the seventh month in 445 BC when they read the book of the law for hours, we said last week maybe five hours of the reading and exposition of the Scriptures. So we come to this passage again and praise God for his word.

Speaking of exposition, I really was blessed this morning by the exposition we had during Sunday morning Bible study. If you weren't here, you missed out on a blessing. We had one of our young men, Scott Rouse, who is dear to many of us and some of us more than others, but he preached during Sunday school, an assignment for his class. He's a senior at Boyce College about to graduate, Boyce College at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he preached from Colossians 1 and it was a real great blessing exalting Christ from Colossians 1:15 to 20. So praise the Lord for the work that he's doing in him and he'll be preaching next Sunday as well, right, next Sunday morning, Sunday morning Bible study as well. So if you can join us, please do.

So Bible exposition really begins, in a sense, as far as Scripture revealing it, in this passage in Nehemiah where the Bible is read and expounded for hours, and we talked last week about this and began looking at the first eight verses and we talked about how revival comes when God inspires a hunger for the word, and then God enables the exposition of the word, and that's what we have in those first eight verses and what we want to talk about today is the effect of the exposition of the word, the effect that God's word produces. So the title of the message this morning is "The Transforming Power of the Preached Word." The transforming power of the preached word. The word expounded, just hearing it is not enough. The word doesn't just change our thinking, it changes our lives, and so what we began to see as we follow through the rest of this passage, this chapter, chapter 9, chapter 10, continues to show us the transforming power of the word of God, but particularly we see it this morning and we're going to be focusing on verses 9 through 12, though we'll be talking a little bit about verses 13 to 18 as well. So we are

going to read the entire eighth chapter and we're going to focus in on verses 9 to 12 and what we're going to see is the transforming power of the preached word, that God changes people by changing hearts, that the Bible transforms individuals from the inside out. This is what the gospel does, the gospel changes lives one life at a time, one heart at a time. This is God's plan for saving sinners. It's not through the movements of nations or social structures, it is through the gospel. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation."

The preaching of the gospel, the word of God, and it changes the individual from the inside out. We're going to see that the Jewish people in the fifth century BC as they hear the word of God read and expounded, look at the impact upon them and it begins in the heart, and that inner transformation then results in an inside-out transformation. It begins in the heart and it works its way out into the attitudes, the changed words, changed behaviors, but it starts in the heart. This is how God works and this is how his word works. So Nehemiah 8:1 to 18.

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. 13 Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. 14 They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. 15 So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written." 16 So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. 17 The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. 18 He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we come this morning to praise and honor You, the King of kings and Lord of lords, and to hear from Your word. We pray that Your Spirit might open our eyes that we might see and understand wonderful things from Your holy law and that we might be changed. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

The transforming power of the preached word. As we read that passage, we see how in verses 8 to 18, we really see the impact began to unfold of the preached word of God, that we see the people responding emotionally to what has been proclaimed. They're weeping and they're weeping so much that they have to be told again and again to stop weeping because today is a day of joy, and then we read about their great joy. And so we see this, that the word seizes the heart, that change begins in the heart, that renovation that the word of God produces starts from the inside out, the same way that, you know, renovating an old house has to sometimes gut the house to do major renovation, so God has to do that in our hearts and that's what happens in salvation and that's what happens as we grow in grace and we have here a picture of that.

So we want to look at this morning the transforming power of the preached word under two points. There are two points this morning and the way that we're looking at it is how the word transforms. How does the word transform the heart? Well, the first thing that the word does, the first point is the word of God reveals your heart. The word of God reveals your heart and when the word of God truly reveals your heart, the inevitable outcome to a heart that is truly seen before the Lord is sorrow. The word of God uncovers, reveals the

heart and the result is sorrow. When we really see ourselves as we are, we should be grieved, we should be broken.

That's what happens to these people as they hear the word of God read and expounded. We don't know exactly where Ezra read and exactly what passages. We know it's from the books of the law, the first five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. We know that as he read there was exposition. They were explaining as we saw, they were translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. There were Levites on the platform taking turns with the reading and the proclamation. There were Levites out among the crowd that from time to time were explaining among smaller groups that people understood what was being read. So the word of God was being brought to bear on the hearts of the people and the result was profound. The result was a broken heart, that people were broken before the word, and this is, in reality, what the word must do to sinners to renovate the heart.

There is no salvation apart from brokenness, not genuine salvation. Genuine salvation begins with brokenness. We see this when Jesus in his first sermon we have recorded at length in the New Testament is the Sermon on the Mount, remember the first words of Jesus' sermon? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." There is a paradoxical nature of the Christian faith is seen in those beatitudes. Blessed are. Literally you could translate the word "Blessed," in a sense, "O how happy are the poor in spirit." The poor in spirit are those who know they have nothing. This word for "poverty" means absolutely destitute. He says, "O how happy are those who realize that spiritually they are absolutely destitute, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Then he says the next, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." When God begins to work in the heart and we see our spiritual poverty, we look at our hearts, the inevitable next step is we mourn over our wickedness and over our inability to do anything good, and this is what's happening to the Jews in Nehemiah 8. They are experiencing profound sorrow and mourning.

It's interesting, in verses 9 to 12 which we're focusing on this morning, there are nine imperatives that are given by Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites to the people, nine commands they make, actually nine commands in three verses, verses 9 to 11. Five of them are basically telling them to stop mourning. We read in verse 9, "Do not mourn. Do not weep." First two imperatives. Do not mourn. Do not weep. Do not mourn or weep, for they were all weeping when they heard the words of the law. Then there are some positive imperatives. "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, send portions." But look what he says next, "Do not be grieved," verse 10, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength." He repeats, "Do not be grieved," in verse 11. "So the Levites calmed all the people, 'Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.'"

So don't mourn, don't weep, do not be grieved. Do not be grieved and actually the word "be still" translated in verse 11 could be translated "be quiet," actually has the force, the imperational force of saying like in English, "Silence!" That's what they're saying. They're saying, "Stop mourning, stop weeping, do not be grieved. Silence, do not be grieved!" To repeat that with that emphasis, that the people were mourning. Now they weren't sinning

in that they were mourning but the Lord is going to show them that mourning is not an end in itself, that it is a means to an end, and this is the beauty of the gospel. This is why the gospel is good news. The gospel, the way of salvation which literally the Greek word for "gospel" means "good news," isn't it interesting, though, that the gospel, the good news begins with bad news?

You see this when you look at the book of Romans. Romans, the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome, is the fullest explication of the gospel that he preached. He says in 1:16, a verse I quoted a little while ago, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation." What he does in the book of Romans is he gives his full gospel. In the providence of God, Paul had uniquely, he had never been to Rome when he writes the letter. Usually, Paul writes letters to churches he's already visited. He's been in Corinth so he writes the Corinthians. He's been in Ephesus so he writes the Ephesians. But here he writes to a group of people he's never preached to. In the wisdom and providence of God, because he wrote to them, a group he had never preached to, they had not heard his gospel so he gives them the whole thing. That's why we have 16 glorious chapters in the book of Romans, and his purpose is to preach his gospel, to fully explain the good news of salvation. So he says, "I'm not ashamed of the good news, the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes." Then he launches into that gospel immediately in chapter 1, verse 18, when he says this, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." And he spends chapter 1 and chapter 2 and most of chapter 3 hammering home on the sinfulness of fallen man, the hopelessness that each of us has apart from God doing something for us, and he comes to a conclusion of this first section in chapter 3, verses 9 to 20, when he summons a long list of quotations from the Old Testament where he says things like, "There is none righteous, no, not even one. There is none who seeks for God. There is none who understands. All have together turned aside and have become corrupt. The poison of asps is under their lips." He's talking about all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. This is the final analysis, every one of us is accountable before God and without hope in the world. That's the first point of the gospel.

Now you hear someone says, "I've got good news," and they start into that, that doesn't sound like good news but it's just like if you go to a doctor and you're having an MRI or CAT scan, and the doctor, and you've been worried about some symptoms you're having, and the good news can come to you that says, "You have a tumor but we have a plan and we can attack this tumor. We can remove it. You can be treated and we have great expectation that you're going to be fine, that you're going to die of something else. None of us knows how long we have but we don't think it's going to be this cancer that kills you." That's actually good news, isn't it, but it's good news that starts with bad news, and if you've kind of got the good news, if you went to that doctor and he knew you had a tumor but he said, "I just don't really like to give anybody any bad news so I'm not going to tell them. I'm just going to say, listen, I'm sorry, he's got a while anyway and so, you know, hey, everything's fine, you're going to be fine." That's malpractice, isn't it? That cancer that isn't a threat becomes a threat.

So in the same way, God is kind and loving and so he tells you and me the bad news so that he can tell us the good news and that's exactly what's happening as they read the book of the law, as they heard the book expounded, they heard the law of God laid out before them, what seized their hearts was how they did not measure up. The reading and exposition of the word causes great sorrow because it exposes sin. What happens when the word is rightly understood, this happens when you're reading the Bible and you rightly understand it, the Spirit is working in your personal Bible reading, the time you're sharing the word one on one or in small groups, whenever we're sharing the word and we rightly understand it and the Spirit uses it, what happens is it exposes sin and the reason it does is because the word of God is the means by which God mediates his presence. This is an amazing reality. God, in one sense, is present everywhere but his presence becomes real to us and experiential to us through the word of God, through the Bible. This is his means.

Now let me show you this, turn over to Isaiah 66:1 and 2. What we see here is the Lord is going to basically point out that the temple really isn't his dwelling place, that that's not really how he mediates his presence. Even though that was a part of what he had revealed because he's teaching us over time in the word progressive revelation, he's giving us different insights and types that teach us more about salvation, but he's elaborating now and saying, "Listen, really, can you ever imagine that I would have dwelt in a temple?" Where does God dwell? How do you experience the presence of God? That's the issue he's dealing with in Isaiah 66:1 and 2.

Verse 1, "Thus says the LORD, 'Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things.'" He's just helping them to see, "Listen, when I made the temple, the place that you go to worship, don't think that I'm contained in a temple. My presence is not limited to a temple. For My hand made all these things," verse 2, "Thus all these things came into being,' declares the LORD. 'But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.'" I think what he's getting at there is that how do you experience the presence of God? You experience the presence of God, God looks to those who are humble and contrite and who tremble at his word. It's the spoken word that mediates the presence of God. It's the spoken word that reveals Christ.

The same kind of idea in Romans 10:6 to 8 where it says, talking about the gospel, it says, you know, how do we come to know righteousness? How do we get right with God? How do we come to know God? And it basically says, if you say, "Who can ascend to heaven, that's to bring Christ down. Who can descend into the earth, that is, to bring Christ up." He's like, basically ask the question, how do you find Jesus? Do you go to heaven to find him? Do you go into the abyss to find him? How do you find Jesus? Then he says this, "You don't do either one of those things but He's present in the preaching of the word." That Christ makes himself known, his presence known as the word is preached; that when the word of Christ is preached, the word about Christ, Jesus himself makes himself known. He comes in the preaching of the word. And so it's always been God's word is the way that he brings his presence to us.

So now think about that. If that's true, then when the word is rightly understood in our reading, when it's rightly understood in our exchanges that we have in teaching one another and encouraging one another, when it's rightly understood in our teaching or preaching, what's happening is God's presence is being made known and revealed among his people, and when God's presence is made known, sinners are coming into the presence of God, what's the inevitable reality? God who dwells in unapproachable light, God who is light is making himself known into our darkness, and the sin that is in us and the darkness that is in us is exposed, and in that we see things we didn't see before. The word of God exposes attitudes, it exposes unbelief, it exposes sin that we didn't even recognize. The word of God does it. Sometimes we recognize sin at some level but the word has a way of showing us the true ugliness, the exceeding sinfulness of sin. When the light shines on it, you see how awful and wicked it is and the word of God does that.

In fact, you see this, turn over to Hebrews 4. This is the way God saves people and this is the way God sanctifies people, through his word. Look how his word searches us. Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The word of God, he says, is like a two-edged sword, that it cuts in and it's able to make the finest distinctions between the types of tissue in the human body. It can make those distinctions in the same way it can distinguish between joint and marrow, it can distinguish between thoughts and intentions. It lays bare the heart of man.

Look what it says in verse 13. Here's the result, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." So the word of God, when the word of God comes into our hearts, when it really does its work and we should want this work every time we read the Bible, every time we hear the Bible, we should want this work to happen, God wants to do heart surgery, he wants to lay open our hearts and show us what's really inside.

Now that's painful. There's always going to be an element of pain. This is what has to happen to be saved. You can't be saved until you know that you're lost. You can't be saved until you understand the exceeding sinfulness of sin and your hopelessness apart from Christ because otherwise you won't run to Jesus and surrender to him and cast yourself upon him. That's why the gospel begins with the bad news. It shows us we are hopeless, we are helpless so that we might run, flee to Christ and see that in his perfect work, in his perfect life, his sinless, perfect record, in his atoning death, his payment for our sins, his bearing our sins in his body on the cross, his glorious resurrection, in that great work, we can find refuge, we who are sinful and without God and without hope in the world.

So we run to Christ out of that. That's what happens. You have to be broken and to despair and to mourn and to see your spiritual poverty, otherwise you can't know true salvation, but that doesn't end. Once you become a believer now, you become born again, you are now a child of God yet the way that we grow is to say as you receive Christ Jesus

the Lord, so also walk ye in him. The way that we grow in Christ is we keep coming to the word and the word keeps exposing things in our hearts. Though we have a new heart, we still have so much of the old man here and God reveals it and he exposes it, and he brings it out into the light so that we, then, can run to Christ afresh and anew and receive his grace, walk in it. It's amazing how the Lord does this and how there are areas of our lives where we don't even know that we are sinning. Isn't it true, if you've been a believer long, you've had moments where you've realized suddenly this pattern of sin had been in your life that you did not even know about, it's like layers of an onion, growth in grace, and God didn't even deal with this layer of an onion for the first 20 years you were a believer, and then he shows it to you, how wicked that is, and he shows it to you, though, not as an end, God isn't bringing us to misery, what we're going to see is this misery is not the end, it's a means to an end, and the end for which God sends the misery is joy unspeakable. He's leading us through the valley out into the broad sunlit uplands.

It's amazing how sin, though, needs to be exposed. Have you ever been convicted of this, that you feel like you're burdened about maybe your spouse's sin, some area? You know, we always, a believer is certainly willing to acknowledge, "Yeah, I'm a sinner. Of course, I am." But a lot of times we're better at admitting that in theory rather than practice. And sometimes we can find, you know, we also have spiritual nearsightedness, I'm sorry, spiritual farsightedness. That's where you see better far than close, right? So we can see other people's sin better than we can see our own, and so we see sin in others and we can, then, "You really need to work on this. This is a real problem area and I want to help you. I want you to grow in grace." And one of the things that we can find out is sometimes we want to help other people not for the glory of God but because their sin bothers us too much. "I just really find your sin to be a bother to me so would you please get it together because you're really bothering me." Now when the Lord shows you that and you see how wicked that evil heart is that would say that, that would see sin as the issue is, "You're bothering me and it's all about me, and you're really troubling me." A heart for God sees that our sin, all of us are sinners, all of us need to grow in grace, and whatever is not in conformity with the will of God, we want to change for his glory, and the way we should confront one another about sin should look a lot more like Jesus when he washed the disciples' feet, it's a beautiful picture of what confrontation should look like.

Remember, that Jesus knowing that he was about to go to the cross, knowing that he's about to, John tells us in his gospel, chapter 13, Jesus knowing where he came from, knowing that he came forth from the Father, knowing that he's about to return, knowing who he is, knowing that he is the eternal God, that he's going back to God, he lays aside his outer garment and he girds himself as a slave and he washes his disciples' feet as they sit at the table before the Lord's Supper. And as he's doing that, Peter is indignant, "No, Lord, You're not going to wash my feet." And Jesus says, "If I don't wash you, you have no part in Me." And Peter says, "Well, don't only wash my feet, wash my head, my hands, everything. If I've got to be washed by You," Peter characteristically just blowing back and forth, isn't he? "Wash me all over, Lord. Give me a bath." And Jesus says, "No, you've already bathed, you don't need to be bathed but you need only to wash your feet. You're clean. That is, you've been saved but your feet are dirty, that is, your feet are soiled because even though you're saved, as you walk through life you're going to be

soiled by the world and you need to be washed, and you need to have one another come along and wash each other's feet." This is actually a picture of what it looks like to confront another brother or sister about a sin issue, the attitude that we are to have is to be a servant, to be like the lowliest household servant when we go and talk with our brother or sister about their sin. That's what Jesus is calling us to.

So you see, when we have a heart that's looking down on somebody, we didn't even know that the real problem is not their sin, the biggest problem in the room if I have that attitude like that, the biggest problem in the room is not the sin over there, it's the sin in here, it is the wickedness of pride and self-righteousness. I think we can hide it in some amazing ways and the word has to reveal it and we hide it in astonishing ways. I remember, this is something I thought before but I remember ministering to someone who was saying that, "You know, I can take anything but I cannot bear the fact that my child would not follow Jesus Christ." That sounds like a very godly sentiment, doesn't it, on the surface, and it can be at some level and we should care about our children. What matters more than their eternal destiny? What parent of a child who isn't a believer is not broken over that when you realize it, and yet that concern, there's such a fine line between that concern that is genuine and loving and that becoming a wicked idol. For someone to say, "I cannot bear if my son doesn't believe," what then happens is that person tries to manipulate their child to believe because they can't handle the unbelief. That's a lack of faith. That's a horrible witness and it's an evil heart, I mean, sinful heart that needs to be repented of in that believer's life because that turns into control. But these things don't become obvious without the word and this is why we have to love one another, speak the word to each other, be under the preaching of the word because there are things in our hearts that we don't see that are going to be there until we die or Jesus comes back and so we need the word regularly to reveal our hearts and to make us sorrowful.

There's a verse in 1 Corinthians 14:25, really interesting. Paul is talking about spiritual gifts there and he's basically arguing for the supremacy of the gift of prophecy, that people ought to want prophecy. At that time in the unfolding of God's plan, there was still tongues, it was still a viable part of the body, and so they were really glorying in that and the Apostle Paul says, "Listen, I would that you would all prophesy because prophesying is what makes a difference because prophesying is how God is made known." And he says if someone comes into your church service and you all speak in tongues, they're going to think you're crazy, but if someone comes into your church service and you're all prophesying, he says this the secrets of their heart will be disclosed and they will know that God is certainly among you and they will fall on their faces, for when the word is proclaimed, that is, prophecy, when the word is made known, the secrets of men's hearts are disclosed which is what everybody needs.

So it brings sorrow and that's what was going on in Nehemiah 8, great sorrow, but the sorrow wasn't the end, it was not to be an end, it was a means to an end and that's why Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites urged the people to stop mourning. The day is holy. Now in reality this is the first day of the seventh month, it is the Feast of Trumpets talked about in Leviticus 23. The Feast of Trumpets is one of the feasts that we're not told a lot about. The other feasts are explained with more detail. The Feast of Trumpets basically

we're told it's a commemoration, it's a remembrance but we're not really told what we remember. It's just to be a blowing of trumpets on the first day of the seventh month. It seems to be, as we look at the rest of Scripture, given by God to inaugurate the seventh month which, as I mentioned last week, the seventh month in the Jewish calendar was the holiest month of all. There were three feasts in the Jewish calendar, three main feasts. There were more than three feasts but three main pilgrimage feasts, that is, where people were called to go to Jerusalem to celebrate them. It was Passover in the first month. The first month in the Hebrew calendar, the Jewish calendar was in March/April and Passover was in that period of time. It corresponds to Easter roughly, our Easter. Then the second feast was Pentecost, and the third feast was the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths as they are talking about here. They celebrate the Feast of Booths as we read in verses 13 to 18. I kind of like the word "Tabernacles" better myself. It's when they build, they all make little tents or tabernacles or booths to live in, and it commemorates the time when God led the nation of Israel through the wilderness with a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud, that God's presence was visibly manifest among the people and they lived in the wilderness in tents, and during that time God was in their midst.

So this is the great feast, 8 to 15, is the happiest feast of all. When you look at the instructions about the feasts in the Old Testament, this was the one that was all about rejoicing and so the seventh month is that opening of that, those holy days and so the first day was not to be a time to be grieved. So we want to move to the second point. I said the word of God reveals the heart, secondly, the word of God revives the heart. It revives the heart. The focus is on joy. It restores joy. We go through sorrow, the word of God brings sorrow but so that it can bring joy, and the exhortation that they give them, "Stop weeping. Do not be grieved," gives way to what they say in verse 10, four imperatives, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions." Go. Eat. Drink. Send. You're to celebrate, this is a time of celebration. This is not a time of mourning. Eat of the fat means eat rich food. Drink of the sweet, drink sweet wine. Send portions to him who has nothing, make this a time of celebration. This is to be a holiday, a wonderful celebration.

You see, the word of God does not end in sadness and brokenness, the word of God, the goal of the word of God is to make you happy in the presence of the Lord and when the Lord is mediating his presence, what happens initially is we are convicted of sin, but once we deal with our sins, what happens is we are in the presence of the living God. We experience what we were created to experience. Psalm 16:11 David says, "In Your presence, O Lord, is fullness of joy; At Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore." And when you're in the presence of God, there is nothing but pleasure and joy.

They exhort them don't be grieved because the joy of the Lord is your strength. The reason there is joy in the presence of God is because God is so infinitely happy. God never has a bad day. He's always carrying out his purpose. Everything is happening according to his plan. The quotation Kim shared earlier about the sovereignty of God, he governs every single molecule in the universe so everything that happens is happening according to his plan. He's never unsettled. He's never anxious. He's always joyful. And to be in his presence and to know that he's always joyful should make you and me joyful even though we go through difficult and dark times because we know God is at work in

it. Somehow this is furthering his purposes. Somehow this is drawing us into a closer relationship with him. But the word that mediates his presence brings conviction but then it brings restoration. It revives us. It makes us what we were really created to be. It actually does surgery on us and removes the cancer and now heals us. The two-edged sword doesn't just cut, it heals, and we become what we were created to be. We become more human as we put off sin, as we acknowledge the evil like the idolatry I was talking about earlier. When you come to understand the sinfulness of what was motivating you in some way you didn't even know it and you're broken over it and then you understand that Jesus Christ died for that too and now you can turn from that. It's freedom. You've been set free, another cord has been taken away, another chain has been broken. There's new bounce in your step. This is what God has for us.

It's interesting when you look at, I mentioned there are nine imperatives and five of them are basically saying stop being sad. It's interesting he gives indicatives, an indicative is a statement of fact, it's a declarative sentence. You know, the ball is red, that's an indicative statement. An imperative is a command, throw me the ball. Right, that's a command. Well, the commands are do not weep. Do not mourn. Do not grieve. And they're rooted in indicatives. The imperatives are based on indicatives and what are the indicatives that motivate the imperatives? You see this in verse 9, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." You see, because the day is holy, do not mourn or weep. Three times he says the day is holy in this passage in these three verses. Verse 10, "Go send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved." Verse 11, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." You see, every time it's connected to the day is holy, do not be grieved.

Now what does it mean that the day is holy? What does holiness mean? It doesn't just mean moral purity. It does mean that but it means much more. Something that is holy is set apart as sacred. Something that is holy is devoted to God. That which is holy is that which is fit for the presence of God. The opposite of holiness is to be defiled, that is, unfit for the presence of God. To be holy is to be fit for the presence of God and so holiness is all about the presence of God. In fact, the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the word "holy" used twice, that is, of all the holy places, this is the Holy of Holies, that's the place where God's presence is most fully manifest as God unfolds his plan of redemption, teaching us through these metaphors. Then later he's going to say, "Listen, it's really not about a particular place, it's about a particular person, Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of the temple. When you know Him, you come into My holiness." But the point is a day is holy means today we are in the presence of God and it is unfitting to remain sad in the presence of God. Sadness is only a step in the process. You move past that by looking to God's provision and then you rejoice in his goodness.

This is what the Lord wants for us and the happiest place on earth is in the presence of God. When you are in the presence of God, no matter where you are and what your circumstance, that's the happiest place on earth because to be with God is to truly be joyful and happy. It's to experience what you were created to know. This is why you can have joy in the most crazy, humanly speaking, circumstance. People can be hating you and you can be joyful, not because you're crazy. Some people could be happy because

they're crazy, right? You can be in outwardly miserable circumstances but because you know the reality of what's going on, you can have true joy that swallows up any sorrow because you know that God is with you and the joy of the Lord is your strength. The fact that he's with me and he's joyful and he's happy, it swallows it up. We're caught up into just the joy of the Lord.

An example of this in Acts 8 where the first, or Acts 7 actually, the first martyr that we're told about in Scripture, Stephen, the deacon is martyred. Stephen is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit begins preaching the word of God to the Jews and the word has its effect, that is, it reveals their sin, it exposes their sin. He basically goes through the history of Israel and shows how they've continually rejected the prophets that God sent, culminating in the rejection of Jesus of Nazareth. The people are cut to the quick, it says in verse 54. They began gnashing their teeth at him, and that's something, to have people gnashing their teeth at you, hating you so much that they're acting almost like animals. But being full of this Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." Even though things are terrible around him, it doesn't matter because he's in the presence of Christ. God has opened up his eyes to see the heavens opened and he sees, and it's so cool, he doesn't just see Jesus seated at the right hand of God, that's what Jesus went to heaven to do, to be seated at the right hand of God, he says, "I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Jesus has gotten up from his chair, his throne, and is standing up looking at his servant, Stephen, as he gets ready to come home and Stephen caught up in this beatific vision is overwhelmed with joy and the glory of Christ so that his circumstances cease mattering. It doesn't change the people. They cry out with a loud voice, cover their ears, rush at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him and Stephen even as he is dying says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit and do not hold this sin against them," just like his Savior.

The happiest place in the world is to be in the presence of God and the word of God brings us into his presence by dealing with our sin, by leading us to Christ, by making us sorrowful so that we, then, can know the joy of forgiveness. We have to get used to that. We have to start wanting that. "Lord," we have to have the attitude, "Lord, do Your work in me when I read Your Bible. I need heart surgery. Do it, Lord." We should come that way when we come to hear a Bible study, when we come to hear the word preached. "Lord, do Your work in my heart. I need to change. I know there are problems out there, Lord, but the problems I want to talk to you about are what's in here." Then we have the wonder of experiencing sorrow but rejoicing.

A wonderful hymn, "The Valley of Vision," shows this paradox, how that the way to joy is through the valley of sorrow. To really be joyful, to really know true joy, you have to become sorrowful and that it keeps on going because we can ask ourselves, first of all, have you ever been sorrowful, truly sorrowful for your sin? If you haven't, you need to question the reality of your salvation because God takes us to the point of knowing our poverty before he saves us. And if you haven't, then seek him to show you your poverty. Get in the word. Stay in the word until he makes that known to you. But if you can

remember the season of your salvation, the time when the Lord was working and he showed you your need of Christ, your despair, then the question I have for us to consider, those of us who have been saved is when was the last time you really felt your spiritual poverty and were grieved over your sin? It's something that should be more regular. Real growth comes through that. It's the way to greater joy. Perhaps the reason you're depressed right now, you're apathetic, is because you haven't been made sorrowful to the point of rejoicing in Christ.

The "Valley of Vision" is a Puritan prayer and it speaks of this way that the Lord does things, that he brings us through difficulty to bless us. It says,

"Lord, High and Holy, Meek and Lowly,
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy glory.

Let me learn by paradox
that the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells,
and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;

Let me find thy light in my darkness,
thy life in my death,
thy joy in my sorrow,
thy grace in my sin,
thy riches in my poverty,
thy glory in my valley."

That is the way of Christ. That is the way of the gospel. That is the way to true, deep and lasting joy and the Lord help us to walk that path.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your grace and mercy in Christ. How grateful we are for Your ways are not our ways, Your thoughts are not our thoughts, as high as the heavens are above the earth, so far are Your ways above our ways and Your thoughts above our thoughts. Lord, we confess our great need of grace, our need for You to use

Your word to humble us, to convict us. Continually, Lord, search us and know us, try our thoughts, break us and then build us and restore us anew. Lord, be glorified in us as we learn to savor more and more the glory of Jesus, for every time You show us our sinfulness, we get to understand more His sufficiency. We pray this in His name. Amen.