

The Stand

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Work in Progress / Nehemiah 8:1–8

By Nehemiah 8, the wall is complete, but the most important moment is still ahead. The people gather together and ask for the Word of God to be read, and when the Book is opened, the entire assembly rises to its feet. In this week's message, we will see why that moment matters and what it means for God's people to stand under the authority of His Word.

Introduction

- The song you just heard Jordan playing is one that is likely very familiar to you.
- In fact, it's a song that has been around for quite some time.
- It's first public performance was 284 years ago.
 - On April 13, 1742, a large crowd gathered in Dublin to hear a brand new musical work by George Frederic Handel.
 - The piece was unlike anything most of the audience had ever heard.
 - Instead of telling a fictional story or celebrating a hero, the entire composition drew its words directly from Scripture.
 - Passages from Isaiah, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the book of Revelation had been woven together into a sweeping musical proclamation of the story of Christ.
 - The work was called *Messiah*.
- Listeners filled the concert hall that evening and sat quietly as the music unfolded.
 - The opening movements carried the promises of the prophets.
 - The music moved through the birth of Christ, the suffering of the Savior, and the hope of redemption.

- Scripture after Scripture rang through the room, sung by soloists and choir, carried along by the orchestra.
- Then near the end of the work came the movement that *Messiah* is most well known for.
- The orchestra swells. The choir rises. And the words of Revelation fill the hall:
 - “Hallelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.”
 - The music gathers strength as the choir continues.
 - “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ.”
 - “And He shall reign for ever and ever.”
- During an early performance of *Messiah* in London, something remarkable happened during that very chorus.
 - As the music reached its triumphant proclamation, King George II rose to his feet.
 - Historians have offered several explanations for the moment.
 - Some believe the power of the music stirred him to stand.
 - Others suggest the words about the reign of Christ moved him to show honor to the King above every king.
 - Whatever the reason, the king stood.
 - And in the presence of the monarch, everyone else in the hall followed.
 - Row after row of listeners rose to their feet as the choir continued to sing.
 - “King of kings...”
 - “Lord of lords...”
- From that day forward, a tradition took shape.

- During performances of Handel’s *Messiah*, audiences around the world often stand during the Hallelujah Chorus.
- Concert halls from London to New York to Sydney have watched thousands of people rise together when those words begin to ring out.
- The music proclaims the reign of Christ.
 - The crowd stands in honor of the King.
 - That scene offers a remarkable picture of a moment we encounter in the Scriptures.
- In Nehemiah chapter 8, the people of Jerusalem gather together in the open square of the city.
 - The wall around Jerusalem has just been rebuilt.
 - The gates have been set in place. The city stands secure once again.
- Yet the most important moment for the people of God has nothing to do with stone walls or wooden gates.
 - Ezra the scribe steps onto a wooden platform built for the occasion.
 - In front of the assembled crowd, he opens the Book of the Law.
- And Scripture tells us something striking happens in that moment.
 - “When he opened it, all the people stood.”
 - No announcement moved through the crowd. No instruction came from the platform.
 - The Book opened.
 - The people rose.
- They stood because the Word of God had been placed before them.
 - They stood because the voice of their true King spoke through those pages.
 - That moment, far more than the wall they had just finished building, became the defining moment for the people of God.

- When the choir sings that Christ reigns, audiences rise to their feet.
 - In Nehemiah chapter 8, something even more powerful happens.
 - Ezra opens the Book of the Law, and an entire nation stands to hear the Word of God.
 - Let's read that moment together in [Nehemiah 8:1–8](#).

Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 8:1–8 *ESV*

¹ And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.

³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.

⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.

⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.

⁶ And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads 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, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.

⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

- The first thing you might notice, if you've been paying attention, is that it appears that I skipped most of chapter 7.
 - In reality, I preached that chapter back in September.
 - [Nehemiah 7](#) is almost identical to [Ezra 2](#).
 - So if you missed it, you can go back and listen on the podcast or on YouTube.
- Thus far in the book of Nehemiah, we haven't heard a whole lot from Ezra.
 - As he appears for this occasion, we are reminded that he has been here all along.
 - And now that Nehemiah's construction work has come to a stopping point, the gates have a schedule and there are appropriate guards, we know that *civic order* has been restored.
 - There is still much work to do regarding moral and spiritual order.
 - And that is what the next couple of chapters is all about.
- As we dig into this text, the first thing that stands out, is that the nation has become...

...a People Hungry for the Word (v. 1)

- The wall was finished in the 6th month - the month of Elul.
 - And v. 2 here tells us that on the first day of the very next month, this great assembly took place inside the newly secured city of Jerusalem.
 - And they gathered for one purpose - to learn God's word.

- There are so many things about this event that stand out, but the first thing that just screams at us from this page is that this is a grassroots event, not a top-down event ordered by Nehemiah and his leaders.
 - It can't be any clearer than it is in v. 1...
 - All the people gathered
 - And they...all the people...told Ezra to get the Book.
- Now, it would have been easier if they had all just gotten on their phones and downloaded the bible app and read it for themselves.
 - It would have been more efficient if they had all just gotten their little Gideon's Bible and read in the comfort of their own homes.
 - Oh, but wait...they didn't have phones and paper was still a luxury, not to mention the likely challenge of literacy.
 - For these people, learning the Word was going to come with some sacrifices.
 - And the reality is, those sacrifices were absolutely worth it.
- And let's not think that this gathering was about reading the exploits of King David.
 - They certainly weren't hearing the intimate poetry from the Song of Solomon.
 - Ezra likely wasn't reading psalms of judgment against Tobiah and Sanballat like it was some kind of religious war-rally.
 - It is very likely that this gathering was focused around Deuteronomy.
 - All scripture is inspired, but some scripture is more challenging than others.
 - And if you've ever done any kind of reading plan that had you reading through Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy - then I'm going to say what you're already thinking - you probably wouldn't have chosen the Law as your first choice for this event.

- But these people WANTED to know the Word.
- One of the greatest indicators of spiritual health is a strong desire for the Word of God.
 - You know this to be true in your own life.
 - When you're struggling with sin, struggling in your walk with Christ, there are a couple of things that start to slide.
 - You might not pray like you once did.
 - You might not want to come to church like you once did.
 - And I can guarantee you that your own personal bible study time (if you had it to begin with) starts to suffer.
 - The reality is that if you're struggling with sin and your walk with the LORD, you don't want to be confronted with anything that tells you that you are wrong.
 - While we know how this happens in our own walk, we can also see how this same kind of aversion to the Word is true institutionally as well.
- The honest, expository preaching and teaching of the Word of God is being replaced by spiritual TED talks and self-help seminars.
 - Famous preachers hold up their bibles and talk about how important the book is, but then they rarely, if ever reference it's pages.
 - If they do use it, they skip passages that challenge the status quo, take a stand on controversial topics, or confront their hearers with things like sin and disobedience.
- This shouldn't surprise us...

2 Timothy 4:3-4 ESV

³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,

⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

- The gathering of the church today is often more focused on the environment and the aesthetics than it is about the Word of God.
 - The buzzword in church growth circles today is called “Sunday Morning Experience.”
 - The fastest growing churches are the ones curating an experience from the parking lot to the pew (or comfy theater style-seat).
 - Hear me in this - I’m all for showing great hospitality (that’s biblical).
 - I’m all for making sure the AC works well and that the room we meet in looks nice and clean.
 - We want to make sure that when you drop your kids off that you feel good about it.
 - And I want to make sure we get things wrapped up in a timely manner when we gather.
 - But if we’re not careful, we can allow these things to become the main thing and when we do, we’ve missed the point.
- But just consider what’s going on here in [Nehemiah 8](#).
 - I bet these people in the streets of Jerusalem, as they stood for hours, listening to Deuteronomy weren’t too worried about their environment.
 - I bet it was hot and stuffy.
 - There probably was a haze over the crowd - but not from a fancy fog machine - it would have been the dust stirred up by thousands of feet shuffling in dusty streets.
 - And I bet there were kids squirming around everywhere.
 - Yet nobody complained.
 - Just give us the Word.

- We can grow churches based on aesthetics, but we can't keep churches that way.
- We keep churches by cultivating a people who are hungry for the Word.
- Not only do Nehemiah's people demonstrate a desire for the Word, we also see...

...a People with Deep Reverence for the Word (vv. 2-5)

- The chapel in my seminary was beautiful.
 - Lots of exposed wood, all stained this dark, cherry color.
 - Instead of stained glass, they had painted murals featuring scenes from the Gospels.
 - The pipes from the organ filled the wall behind the pulpit.
 - The room felt sacred.
 - But the pulpit was my favorite.
 - It was huge...you had to climb up a couple of steps to get into the pulpit.
 - On the four-corners of the pulpit, it had full carvings of some of the most famous preachers from church history.
- The pulpit preached a sermon even if there was no preacher present.
 - And the sermon was this - the Word of God is the centerpiece of this sacred space.
 - Everything else must submit itself to that fundamental truth.
- As we continue through these verses, we learn that the people are not only hungry for the Word, they understand that this is more than just a history lecture.
- First of all, they built a pulpit for the occasion.
 - We're told in v. 4 that Ezra stood on a platform built just for the occasion.

- The KJV actually calls it a pulpit.
 - The word has the sense of a dias.
 - That's an old word, but it refers to the raised platform where the king was seated for an event or the raised platform where the ruler addressed his subjects.
- But in this case, the dias isn't built because of Ezra, it's built for the occasion.
- The occasion isn't about Ezra, it's about the Word of God.
- So the Word of God is that which is honored with a dias, not the one reading it.
- The text gives us some of the names of those who will assist Ezra, but then v. 5 does something else that is incredibly profound, showing the reverence these people felt for the Word.
 - As Ezra opened the book (Or unrolled the scroll), we're told that the people stood.
 - He didn't instruct them to do so...they just did it.
 - We stand whenever I read the passage I'm preaching from, but we don't remain standing.
 - These people stood and remained standing until their conviction got the best of them later on.
 - This was an act of reverence.
- It is very easy for people to confuse the honor here.
 - The honor is for the Word, not the man.
 - The pulpit was built for the Word, not the man.
 - The people stood because of the Word, not the man.
- There's a reason we don't have the old "thrones" sitting on the platform behind the pulpit.

- There's a reason we only stand when the Word is read, not when the preacher goes up.
- I'll be honest, I get nervous when we clap for singers and instrumentalists for fear of taking away from the primacy of the Word of God.
- I don't even like that the funeral home makes the preacher sit on the stage.
- Whenever we show reverence toward something, we're saying just how important that something is.
 - You see the word "revere" in the word reverence.
 - To revere something is to recognize it's priority and primacy.
 - I would think if you were going to go skydiving, you would likely revere the instructions given to you by whoever is in charge.
 - You're going to listen VERY carefully.
- We see back in v. 3 that the people REVERE the Word.
 - They're listening ATTENTIVELY.
 - They're not scrolling through TikTok, or looking at the menu of the restaurant they're headed to if Ezra would just hurry up and land the plane.
 - They understood exactly what Moses said in [Deuteronomy 32:46–47](#)

Deuteronomy 32:46–47 ESV

⁴⁶ he said to them, "Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law.

⁴⁷ For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess."

- It is no empty word...but your very life.

- **RETURN TO POINT**

- This isn't just lip service.
 - My attentiveness to the Word of God truly deals with matters of life and death, Heaven and Hell.
 - When you fall out of the raft in the middle of the white water rapid, you realize you should have paid closer attention when the guide was walking you through the safety briefing.
 - When the oxygen mask falls from the ceiling in the airplane, you know you should have listened closer to the flight attendant while you were still on the ground.
 - Nehemiah here is reminding us that the Word is of just as much consequence and it deserves our reverential attention.
- Finally, Nehemiah reminds us here about the importance of good and godly teachers because these are a people...

..who Eagerly Want to Learn the Word (vv. 7-8)

- Hearing is good...but spiritual growth doesn't just come from hearing.
 - We need to learn it.
 - And we need to learn why it matters.
- There's a group of men here in Jerusalem who are qualified teachers.
 - I already butchered their names once, so I'll spare you from that carnage again.
 - But the format appears simple.
 - Ezra reads, and these men would seem to be scattered throughout the crowd explaining what it means.
 - That's all we get.
- Please note...
 - There's nothing exotic here.

- Scripture read, scripture explained, scripture understood.
- There's no cutting edge teaching methodologies, no movie clips to illustrate the point.
- No innovation, no speculation - just simple instruction.
- Teachers and preachers today need to remember that simple calling.
 - I never want to be boring, yet at the same time my primary job is not to impress you with my oratory skills.
 - I never want to be dull, yet at the same time this is not a weekly stand-up routine.
 - I never want to be irrelevant, yet at the same time this is not a weekly commentary on the news and politics of the week.
 - My job is to help people understand what God said.
 - Listen, for those who preach and teach...whether it's to a group of teenagers on Wednesday night or a group of 70-year olds on Sunday morning.
 - The word of God isn't boring.
 - The word of God isn't dull
 - The word of God isn't irrelevant.
 - So we should work hard to make sure we don't make it that way by how we handle it.
 - But when we say the final AMEN after we preach or teach, the only question that really matters is this, "To the best of my ability, with the gifting of the Holy Spirit, did I explain what God has said?"
- But there's another side to that...the learning process isn't just about those who teach, it is also about those who learn.
- If teachers and preachers are evaluating themselves, then learners need to ask the question...

- Did I show up ready to learn, ready to hear from the LORD?
- Did I pray for open ears, open eyes, open heart?
- Did I study my lesson for Sunday School so I can be a meaningful contributor?
- Did I put my phone on DND mode so I'm not getting notifications about Instagram posts and coupons for lunch?

Invitation

- As we come to the end of this passage, it is worth remembering that the moment we have been studying in [Nehemiah 8](#) began with something very simple.
 - Ezra opened the Book.
 - That is all the text tells us.
 - He opened the Book...
 - and the people stood.
- No announcement moved through the crowd.
 - No instruction echoed through the square.
 - The Book opened.
- The people rose.
 - They stood because they understood something that is easy to forget.
 - The words contained in that scroll did not come from Ezra.
 - They did not come from Nehemiah.
 - They came from the living God who had entered into covenant with His people.
 - When the Word of God was placed before them, the only appropriate response was reverence.

- That moment stands as one of the most important moments in the entire book of Nehemiah.
- The wall had been rebuilt.
 - The gates had been hung.
 - The city had been secured.
- Yet the future of God's people would never depend on a wall of stone.
 - Their future depended on whether they would live under the authority of the Word of God.
 - And the same is true for us.
- Churches do many good things.
 - We build buildings.
 - We organize ministries.
 - We support missions and missionaries.
 - We gather for fellowship and service.
 - Those things have value and purpose in the life of the church.
 - Yet the defining mark of the people of God has always been this: a people who gather around the Word of God and place themselves beneath its authority.
- The strength of a church is not measured by its programs or its reputation.
 - The strength of a church is measured by the place the Word of God holds among its people.
 - When the Word is opened, the people listen.
 - When the Word speaks, the people respond.
 - When the Word calls for repentance, the people turn from sin.
 - When the Word points to Christ, the people look to Him in faith.

- In [Nehemiah 8](#), the people stood when the Book was opened because they recognized the voice of their King.
 - The King was speaking.
 - And when the King speaks, His people stand.
 - That is why the moment we have studied today matters so much.
 - The wall around Jerusalem protected the city.
 - The Word of God would shape the people.
 - And that truth still holds today.
- Whenever the Word of God is opened, the King of heaven addresses His people.
- So the question before each of us is very simple.
 - When the Word of God is opened...how will we respond?
 - Will we listen with attentive hearts?
 - Will we receive what God has said with humility?
 - Will we allow the truth of Scripture to shape our lives?
 - Because the people of God are at their strongest when they live with this posture: Standing under the authority of the Word of God.