When God's People Gather...

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[0:00] Welcome to Built on God's Word, the preaching and teaching ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.! Jeremy Norton teaches on Nehemiah 8.!

Two weeks ago, we saw the walls completed and Nehemiah setting up the structure of the city. He enlists two men, Hananiah his brother and Hananiah, chosen because he was faithful and God-fearing, to leave the city of Jerusalem.
Last week, God put in Nehemiah's heart to repopulate the city with God's people. Evan helpfully reminded us of the exile and the return, and we observe the importance of the names recorded in the rest of chapter 7.
This week begins the reform of the people. Nehemiah has played the leading part to this point in the narrative. Beginning today, we will see him temporarily fade into the background as the focus shifts more fully to the people.
Our first discussion question there is on the back of your handout. I put them upside down on purpose, so some of you have probably flipped them over. That's okay. But our first discussion question for you to consider and talk about at your table is, what should characterize a gathering of God's people?
[1:29] So if we heard that a group of people were getting together and they were believers, what would we expect that gathering to look like? Take a few minutes at your table to discuss that.

What are some characteristics we would expect to see when God's people are gathered together? Okay. What should we expect to see when God's people are gathered?
Worship. Worship. Primary, right? The first thing we should expect to see is worship. So how? What are some elements of that worship? Absolutely.
Great, Harvey. Yeah. Being united under biblical teaching and prayer. Talked about breaking of bread in there. So that's something we might observe. As Baptists, we tend to do that regularly, it seems like.
Any other things that come to mind? Worship. Sitting under teaching, prayer.
[2:36] Singing. Singing. Singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Right? Spirit of unity. Spirit of unity. Yep. Harvey, get on that.

Practicing the one another's. Caring for one another. Generosity. Giving. Yeah. These are all things we would expect to see as God's people gather. Right? Today, we're going to see a worship service that was part of the normal Jewish calendar.
It was a time of celebration that coincided with the Jewish Civic New Year, and the walls of Jerusalem had been completed, so it was a great time of celebration. There was a lot to be excited about. As we read through, we are going to see the primacy of Scripture in worship.
And you will likely recognize some of the things we do in our church today that relate back to what happened in Nehemiah's time. Our main idea there at the top of your handout on the front is the gathering of God's people focuses on the worship of God through the reading, understanding, and responding to His Word.
The gathering of God's people focuses on the worship of God through reading, understanding, and responding to His Word. So I broke this down into two large sections.
[3:49] We have a corporate gathering, and then we have a gathering of the leaders that's a little bit smaller. So the first part of the text is going to be a corporate gathering. The second part is going to be a smaller group.

So let's begin with Nehemiah 7, 73, the second half of that verse through 8, 5. And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities.

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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.
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.
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 and those who could understand, and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.
Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mathathiah, Shimeiah, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Massiah on his right hand, and Padaiah, Meshael, Malkijah, Hashem, Hashabodana, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.
[5:06] 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. There's a lot of information in those few verses that we need to unpack to understand what follows.

First, we are in the seventh month, and the people are in their cities. They likely had been living in Jerusalem while they were working on the wall, but since it was completed, they had all returned home.
As Evan mentioned last week, Jerusalem was a de facto ghost town. The seventh month in the Jewish calendar is Tishrei. In chapter one, we were in Chislev, which is the ninth month, and in chapter two, we were in Nisan, which is the first month.
Nehemiah is two months away from it being a full year since he got the initial news about Jerusalem from his brother when he was in Susa. It's been about six months since he had the conversation with the king to get authorization to start the building project.
The seventh month that we're in now is September-October time frame. In our current calendars. And it's full of important Jewish festivals. The seventh month represented the beginning of the civil new year.
[6:18] It was the end of the harvest. And the Feast of Trumpets, or Rosh Hashanah, was celebrated on the first day of the month. Numbers 29 records the various festivals and associated sacrifices that were part of the month of Tishrei.

We were not going to cover all that today, but I encourage you to go back and review that section of text in light of what we're reading in Nehemiah 8. Because this is what they would have read that drove them to do what they're going to do.
Okay? So, Numbers 29.1 says, Now in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no laborious work. It will be to you a day for blowing trumpets.
Hence the Feast of Trumpets. God, through Moses, commanded a holy convocation and a day of rest. What do we see happening in 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 God had given to Israel. They engage Ezra and ask him to bring the book of the law.
[7:25] Nehemiah was a fantastic civic leader and a godly man. We've seen that. But Ezra was the teacher of the people. The people make this request.

It isn't something driven by Ezra or Nehemiah, their leaders. They were hungry for the word to be taught. Continuing on into verse 2, Ezra brings the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could understand when listening.
This most certainly included kids of ages that could understand what was being said. We have a gathering of all of God's people of all ages and genders. And what does Ezra do?
In verse 3, He reads from it before the square which was in front of the water gate from early morning until midday in the presence of men, women, and those who could understand. And all the people were attentive to the book of the law.
Verse 3 kind of concludes this introductory section. Those first three verses are kind of an introduction. And then we move to verses 4 through 12. It's more details on what happened. The first point in your outline there is read God's word.
[8:28] Read God's word. I want to highlight a few things in this verse. It says from early morning until midday. This is probably six hours. Ezra may have done all this reading himself, but it is likely the men listed in verse 4 helped them.

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Now, I did say this was six hours. Notice how the people responded. All the people were attentive to the book of the law. They were attentive.
How many of you ever attended a six-hour sermon? Anybody listen to a six-hour sermon? It's a long time. It's a long time to keep at attention. Some of us have problems with the 45 minutes, right?
So, six hours. They're fully engaged in this. That's a long time to be attentive. Men, women, and all those who could understand were focused on the word.
So, it wasn't just adults. There were kids in the crowd as well. We're going to see the details that follow, but it probably wasn't just Ezra standing and reading the whole time.
[9:35] He likely paused for the Levites that were in the crowd to help the people with translation and understanding. What is the physical element in verse 4 that looks familiar to us today?

Yeah, the wooden podium or platform, right? This was the pulpit they had built specifically for this purpose.
The purpose being the preaching and teaching of God's Word. This practice has been carried down through the ages to today. How pulpits have been designed over time has varied, but the purpose of the pulpit has not changed.
We had the opportunity this summer to visit St. Peter's Cathedral in Geneva where Calvin preached. In that church, they have a replica of what his pulpit looked like.
Because he taught during a time before electronic amplification, it was a more central location in the church. It's a small wooden platform kind of wrapped around a column.
[10:34] So when you see it, there are these steps that kind of wind up to it. It's attached to a column partway back in the church. And then it has a roof over the top of it. That roof was for the audio amplification because they didn't have sound boards or microphones, right?

So week after week, Calvin would climb those steps. Now, this is a replica, right? So it's not the exact thing. But he would climb those steps and he would expound the Word of God. We see this today at Highland Park.
Pastor Mike climbs the stairs of our stage, opens the Word of God on the pulpit designed for the preaching of the Word, and expounds the text to us. Now, a pulpit is not required for the teaching of the Word, but it has been a consistent feature of church gatherings throughout the course of history.
Verse 5 specifically notes that Ezra is above the crowd. He opened the book, which was likely scrolls at the time, in the sight of everyone. He was elevated so that he could be seen and heard.
How do the people respond? What do they do? They stood up. This is also a feature of our weekly worship service.
[11:47] The purpose of rising during the reading of Scripture is a physical reminder of the attentiveness to and respect of the Word. This has been a consistent feature of all the churches I've attended over the course of my Christian life.

And I find it interesting here that Ezra doesn't ask them to stand. It's an unsolicited response to his opening of the scrolls. Moving to verses 6 through 8, we're going to see our second point.
Understand God's Word. So we read God's Word and understand God's Word. As a quick aside before we get into the text, understanding is mentioned six times in this chapter.
Verse 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, and 13, it says gain insight, which is understanding. Looking at the text, Nehemiah 8, 6 through 8. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen.
While lifting up their hands, they bowed low and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.
Also Yeshua, Bani, Sherabiah, Jamin, Aqib, Shethabathiah, Hodiah, Messiah, Ketaliah, Azariah, Jezebub, Hanun, Paliah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place.
[13:05] They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. Ezra prays, and we see the people respond with verbal assent and physical worship.

They affirm Ezra's prayer with Amen, Amen, and then proceed to raise their hands and bow down to God. Derek W. H. Thomas captures this well. Where the word of God is faithfully expounded, the God of Scripture is exalted, and those who hear it cannot do anything except worship.
Verses 7 and 8 identify 13 additional men, beyond the ones that were on the platform with Ezra, and these men are Levites and are dispersed among the crowd. Notice what they are doing.

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Verse 8, they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give a sense so that they understood the reading. Not everyone had a copy of his own scriptures in Ezra's day.
They are among the people to read, translate, and bring understanding. Now, not all English translations include the word translate in the text. However, I believe it is an appropriate inclusion in the New American Standard.
[14:20] The law was written in Hebrew. The people had been in exile and under foreign control for over a hundred years. They were likely all speaking Aramaic, with some, but not all, still understanding Hebrew.

Here, we have the Levites working in the crowd to both translate the Hebrew into Aramaic, and also bring understanding, which is key. Ezra could read the scripture for hundreds of hours, but if the people don't understand it, then it will have no impact.
If you wanted an analogy to Highland Park, think about it like our community groups. Pastor Mike teaches on Sunday morning, and then Sunday evening, smaller groups gather to further understand and apply the teaching.
Verses 9-12 record the response of the people. So the third bullet is respond to God's word. I don't want to get too formulaic, but read, understand, respond.
That's how we interact with God's word in a worship service. In this corporate gathering of people, we see these three elements throughout. This is the framework for all Bible study, but it must be the framework followed when God's people gather corporately to worship Him.
[15:31] While different congregations may do it differently, if they aren't consistently reading, understanding, and responding to God's word, then what are they doing? Let's see how the people respond here.

Nehemiah 8, 9-12. Then Nehemiah, who was the governor and Ezra the priest and the scribe and 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.
Then they 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. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be still, for the day is holy.
Do not be grieved. 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.
[16:32] The people heard the word read, they understood it, and they were distraught over their disobedience. This is a right response to sin.

When we encounter the word and discover sin in our lives, we should mourn over it. But notice what the people are instructed to do by the leaders. There's potential here for the crowd to get whipped up into some kind of emotional hysteria that may not represent true repentance.
The leaders calm them with the truth. Look at the verse there. This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. Down partway through verse 10. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.
Throughout Scripture, we see this pattern of mourning or sadness being turned into joy. Evan covered part of Jeremiah 29 last week that promised the return of Israel out of exile.
When we go to Jeremiah chapter 31, God promises the people that their mourning will be turned into joy. Verse 13 of chapter 31 in Jeremiah reads, Then the virgin will rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old together, for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow.
[17:43] The greatest conversion of mourning to joy is Christ's death on our behalf. In John 16, 20-22, Jesus is speaking of His impending death.

His disciples that had spent three years with Him, that love Him, are going to experience mourning because He will be killed in a brutal way to pay for their sins and the sins of all that believe in Him.
John 16, 20-22. Truly, truly, truly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy.
Whenever a woman is in labor, she has pain because her hour has come. But when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that the child has been born into the world.

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Therefore, you too have grief now, but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.
[18:47] Jesus compares the mourning to joy conversion to the experience of a woman in labor. She experiences great pain, but the joy yielded from the child that is born makes her forget the pain.

This is how we should experience what Christ has done to pay for our sin. It should grieve us that our sin caused our sinless Savior to die on the cross. But that mourning gives birth to joy because the price has been paid.
Through our faith in Christ, we are delivered from the burden of our sin debt that we could never pay. Praise the Lord. I like the way Warren Wiersbe characterizes this. He says a couple different things.
It is as wrong to mourn what God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us. It is as wrong to mourn what God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.
He also provides this reminder. God doesn't give us joy instead of sorrow or joy in spite of sorrow, but in the midst of sorrow. It's not a substitution, but a transformation.
[20:00] The leaders are reminding the people that today is a day of celebration of what the Lord has done. They provide instructions. 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. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be still, for the day is holy. Do not be grieved. 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.
They disperse and celebrate. Notice, they also provide for those that did not have. This was a time of full participation in sharing in the celebration regardless of one's means.
And the leaders provided instructions to ensure that happened. Okay, so that's the first section. The second section is the same outline, so you can fill in the blanks with the same words.
But it's going to look different because day one is completed. This is going to be some small group discipleship. For our second discussion question there on the back, I want you to read Nehemiah 8, 13 through 18, and identify the reading, understanding, and response of the leaders to God's Word.
[21:17] As you look at the understanding and response, as time allows, consider Numbers 29, 12 through 35, and Deuteronomy 31, 10 through 13. These are likely the texts they may have been looking at before they provide instructions that are in those verses in Nehemiah.

I'm going to read chapter 8, verses 13 through 18, and then we'll discuss. Then on the second day, So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all the 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 booze as it is written.
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.
The entire assembly of the house who had returned from the captivity made booze 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. 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.
[22:55] So as we look through there and see the pattern of the leaders reading, understanding, and responding, they had completed the first day and gone home. For day two, the leaders come back, the heads of the father's household, for more study.

The end of verse 13, that they might gain insight into the words of the law. This wasn't merely a personal exercise. As leaders of the household, they were responsible for the spiritual leadership of those entrusted to their care.
These men gathered and read. What did they understand or discover? As you guys talked about at your tables. What did they understand or discover?
Yeah. Turns out they weren't properly observing the Feast of Booze or Sukkot as instructed in the law.

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I provided those two references in Numbers and Deuteronomy. If you guys didn't get a chance to look at those, I encourage you to do that this afternoon. We're not going to read those together because they're kind of long. But that was probably what they read.
[23:56] They would have been reading in Numbers or Deuteronomy and discovering that they weren't doing what they were supposed to do in the way they were supposed to do it. Their understanding was then extended to the people in verse 15.

So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all the 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 booze as it is written.
We have a responsibility to share understanding with others. Men, in particular, God has called you to lead your family. As you study God's Word, you ought to be sharing it with those entrusted to you.
Before moving to the final verses, I want to note that it doesn't mention the Day of Atonement here or Yom Kippur. We don't know that it was celebrated, but based on all the surrounding events, for example, them figuring out that they weren't obeying the Feast of Booze, it's likely that it was.
It would have occurred on the tenth day of the month, and the central observance of this day was a ritual that involved the sacrifice of one goat and the sprinkling of the blood onto the altar in the Holy of Holies to cover the nation's sin.
[25:05] And the other goat, the laying on of hands, so hands were laid on the other goat, and he was driven out into the wilderness to represent the separation of sins from the people.

Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of these requirements, as he bore our sins on the cross and separated us from our sins as far as the east is from the west. Verses 16 through 18 record the response of the people to what the leaders instructed them to do.
The people go out and gather branches and build booze. This was to begin on the fifteenth day of the month, so they had about two weeks, because they're on the second day now, they had about two weeks to prepare. The purpose of the booze was to remind Israel of their wandering in the wilderness and God's provision.
This would have been like a camping trip. The people gathered branches and built huts on their roofs and courtyards in the square and lived in them for a week. This would have been a physical sight to see.
As you look out over Jerusalem, you've got these just temporary huts kind of spread out everywhere. Once a year, they were built, lived in, and then destroyed and done again the next year.
[26:17] I liken this to our camp experiences today. We change our environment to reflect and focus on the worship of God. Where Laura is from in Pennsylvania, and this is kind of an East Coast thing, they have a thing called camp meeting.

The main one where she is from was founded in 1892 with 19 tents. So they would just go out, pitch tents, worship for a week, and then go home. It's a family camp, but I like to think about it as a week-long revival.
People pause their normal activities to gather, sing, hear the Word preached, and do activities together as a group of believers. Now, it's evolved over the last hundred years, but for the first 35, they didn't have cabins.
They would pitch tents and worship. Today, they have small cabins that are owned by families and passed down from one generation to the next. It reminds me a little bit of this Feast of Booze in a modern context that we see the Jews observe here.
The purpose is to pause your normal activities and focus on the worship of God. As we close, I want to highlight a couple of other things in the last two verses.
[27:22] First, everyone participated. This wasn't a portion of the people. Verse 17, the entire assembly of those people who had returned from the captivity made booze and lived in them.

It mentions that Israel had not done so since the days of Joshua. We know they celebrated this feast during the time of the kings, so it wasn't that they didn't celebrate. It was that they didn't celebrate with this amount of joy and participation.
The final verse documents that Ezra read from the book of the law of God daily, every day. The celebration culminated on the eighth day according to the requirements of the law.

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To kind of sum up, there had been a revival in Jerusalem, and the process of the people reformation had begun. They read God's word, understood God's word, and responded to God's word.
As we move through the rest of Nehemiah, we will see how the people are changed, how they backslide, and how they need continued reformation to draw them back to the Lord.
[28:23] As we gather, may we be continually reformed by the reading, understanding, and response to God's word. I have a few points of application for consideration there at the end.

How is your personal worship time structured? Does it follow the pattern of read, understand, and respond to God's word? Consider if there are any adjustments you need to make.
Two, do you prioritize gathering with God's people? If not, why? If so, are there any adjustments you need to make to be more prepared for corporate worship?
Finally, in our text today, we observe both large and small group worship. Are you consistently involved in both? Are there any changes you need to make in this regard?
So think about those. Consider if there are any changes you need to make accordingly. I'll pray for us. Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, we thank you for our time this morning. As we gather together and study your word, we seek to read, understand, and respond.
[29:30] Lord, I pray that that will be true of the people in this class. We will look at what occurs in Nehemiah 8 and see that as a pattern for how we are to worship you. As we study your word and live it out.

We pray that as we go to main worship, Lord, that will be a focus. That we will hear your word preached. That you will fill Mike with your spirit and speak to us what you need us to know. Help us to understand it, Lord.
And then to go out and respond. We'll respond through singing. We'll respond through praying. We'll respond in multiple ways, Lord. We pray that we will live it out. Help us to honor you in what we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
To learn more, visit us in person or see the website at highlandparkbaptist.net.
Thank you. Thank you.

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