



Central Peninsula Church

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Nehemiah 8
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The People and the Book

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

When we see a video like that most of us are probably not sure whether to laugh or cry. It's clear that the biblical illiteracy in our culture is astounding. And yet there is also a great need for truth. I'm struck by something Tabitha Soren, an MTV political correspondent, wrote, "No matter how secular our culture becomes, it will remain drenched in the Bible. Since we will be haunted by the Bible even if we don't know it, doesn't it make sense to read it?"

Of course, most of us here would say, "Yes, it does make sense." For many of us, that's why we're here and not out sailing, washing our car, or watching TV. And yet, isn't it true that even we often reflect the same mixed emotions about the Bible that we see in our culture? On the one hand, we know that we need the truth, but on the other hand, we don't always want to do the hard work of learning and living the truth.

We're in a series of studies on the church and one of the priorities of this church has always been to teach the Bible. If you were to go on our website, you would find our four priorities, and one of those is called, "The Priority of God's Precepts." Here's what it says, "At the center of the Christian faith is the Word of God. Since God has chosen to reveal Himself through His Word, the teaching, study and meditation of the Bible is essential to our relationship with Him. Our understanding of God's Word forms the basis of our understanding of God, ourselves, and our world. An essential part of salvation is being **"transformed by the renewing of our minds."** (Romans 12:2) In this day of shifting values and relative morality, the Bible gives us timeless truth around which we can build our lives."

This morning I want us to take a closer look at WHY this is such an important priority for us. You see, I don't believe we can afford to be biblically illiterate. The state of the church, the state of our families, and the state of our lives depends on our commitment to the Scriptures. But why is that?

To answer that question, I want to go back to 445 BC. Many years earlier the Babylonians had invaded Jerusalem, dragging most of its citizens into exile in Babylon. It wasn't too long before Babylon fell to Cyrus, the king of Persia. And it was Cyrus who reversed Babylonian policy and allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem. Their main purpose was to rebuild the temple, which after a number of years they were able to do. Now it's one thing to have a temple, but it's quite another thing to have a defensible city. And so the next task was to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem so the city could be defended. This would be the job of a guy named Nehemiah. Nehemiah mobilized the people of Jerusalem in such a way that the walls were rebuilt in just 52 days.

But there was still more work to do. The walls were up but the people were still broken down. There was a need to spiritually rebuild the people of God. The Jews lacked that kind of unquenchable faith and joy that God intended his people to

know. They'd compromised in their walk with him. You couldn't tell them apart from the world around them. And so, there was a need for a kind of revival and awakening among God's people. And that's what happened. God "visited" his people in a very powerful way, and he did it through the exposition of the Scripture.

The exposition was carried out by a man named Ezra. He was a Scribe. Ezra had been in Jerusalem for about 13 years, long before Nehemiah had arrived. And it was through the Word of God that this gentle, scholar-teacher named Ezra sparked a revival. Turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah 8.

"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, 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 Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. 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. 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. 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. They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading" (vv.1-8).

I. Biblical exposition begins with a deep hunger for the Scriptures.

First, notice that there was a deep desire for the Scriptures. In v. 1 the writer makes it clear that the people took the initiative to gather at the Water Gate. It says **"all the people gathered,"** as if it were a spontaneous meeting put together not by the leaders but by the people. And it says that

"they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law," as if they were impatient to get Ezra onstage and hear what the word had to say. They were a little like an impatient audience at a rock concert, chanting "We - want - Ezra," over and over, louder and louder. And it says down in v. 4 that Ezra **"stood at the wooden podium which they had made for the purpose,"** as if the people wanted to make sure that the word of God was lifted up and all could hear. Over and over in the text it says these things weren't done just by a few spiritually minded people, they were done by **"all the people."** That little phrase **"all the people"** is found in this chapter nine times!

How do you explain hunger and desire like this? These people weren't coming to be entertained or because they had nothing better to do. Ezra probably wasn't the greatest preacher in the world. I imagine he was quite dry at times. So what was it? The only explanation for this is that the Holy Spirit had worked on their hearts, giving them an interest in God and a desire to please him that is out of the ordinary. When the Spirit moves, he creates a hunger and thirst the things of God. Often, for that to happen, we have to become dissatisfied with things as they are. We have to come to grips with the shallowness of our spiritual life. And then and only then will we want more.

While it is the Holy Spirit's work, listen to what Peter writes in the NT, **"Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation."** It's been a few years since we've had a baby in the house, but I can still remember what powerful lungs they have when they're hungry! And usually there was only one thing that would satisfy them - milk! Do we hunger for the word of God like that? Do we crave it and cry out for it?

II. Biblical exposition includes having a deep respect for the Scriptures.

One of the reasons they craved it so much was that they had a deep respect for it. Notice their reverence and humility as they approach the Word. When the book was opened the people stood as a sign of respect. From what we can tell, they stood and listened to Ezra for six hours. They worked hard at listening. They showed their humility by bowing low and worshipping with their faces to the ground. Even the podium emphasized a sense of authority.

This is how to approach the teaching of the Word - with reverence and humility. In the Scottish church to this day the service begins with the entrance of a man called the beadle. He enters carrying the Bible which he places on the pulpit. When he enters, all the people stand and they remain standing until the pastor comes up and opens the book and is ready to read. This isn't worship of the Bible itself, but it's an acknowledgment of what the Bible is.

Paul says about the Scriptures in 2 Timothy 3:16, **"All Scripture is inspired by God..."** That word "inspired" is not like when you're inspired by a beautiful sunset to write a poem. The word used here literally means "God-breathed." It means God superintended the human author's writing. It doesn't mean all preaching is inspired. A.T. Robertson said, "One proof of the inspiration of Scripture is

that it has withstood so many years of poor preaching." Some preaching is very uninspiring, but the word of God doesn't change; the word of God is always inspired.

III. Biblical exposition takes seriously the reading of the Scriptures.

That's why Ezra was careful to read it out loud. Biblical exposition starts with the reading of Scripture. Ezra took the book of the Law, stood on a podium so that people could hear him, and after a brief time of worship he simply read from the book of the law.

The reason I emphasize this is because I want you to notice that the focus was on the Book of God rather than some performance they came to applaud. The focus was not on the opinion or wisdom or creativity of man. When we just read the Scripture we're reminded to just let God speak. Maybe that's why Paul said to Timothy, **"Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture..."** (1 Tim. 4:13).

When we read from God's book, it's critical we understand that God is speaking. By simply reading the Scripture out loud, we're reminded that God's word ought to form our thinking - not the sermon outline, or the preacher's funny stories, or the clever video.

Now, of course, when we read, we should try to do that well. All of us have had the experience of someone reading in a monotone voice, with no feeling, and with the attitude of let's try to get this over with so we can hear what the preacher has to say about it. On the other hand, we've heard those who read with understanding, with passion, with thoughtfulness. It makes a big difference. In my doctoral program, we spent a day with a man named Max McClean, a Broadway actor, who brings the Bible alive just by the way he reads it. The whole day was spent with him just teaching us how to read the Bible out loud.

By the way, that's why it's a good idea that you have your own Bible, and that you bring your own Bible to church. We put these words up here on the screen for those who maybe don't have a Bible yet, or who forgot, but don't let this substitute for you getting accustomed to holding this book in your hands, knowing your way around it, and following along as we read.

IV. Biblical exposition seeks to explain the Scriptures.

But notice that Ezra didn't just read it; it was also explained. Ezra read from the Scripture, but this reading was periodically broken up by translation and explanation given by the levites. You see, the Law was written in Hebrew and many of these Jews had forgotten their own Hebrew language. For years they'd been speaking the Aramaic language of the people around them, so they needed translation. But, not only that, they were ignorant of the Word of God so they needed someone to explain it and apply to their situation. So Ezra would read a portion and then the levites stationed at various places in the crowd would take a smaller group and translate and explain it. There is a great emphasis in this chapter on the **"understanding"** of the people. Vv. 2, 3 speaks of gathering those **"who could listen with understanding."** V. 8 says the levites translated **"so that they understood the reading."**

This is why at this church we are committed to explaining of the Word of God on Sunday morning. Exposition ought to make the Scripture clear; to present it in language that people can understand, and then to apply it to situations we face in the

contemporary world. We don't do twenty minute, feel-good, topical sermons here. Though at times we'll address special topics, we don't determine what to preach based on the latest current events. We usually try to take a book of the Bible and teach it from start to finish. Teaching through entire books of the Bible insures that we get a balanced diet of the Word; it protects us from harping only on those issues we feel deeply about. And it's this that changes lives. As we begin to understand the Scripture in its range and depth our false perceptions about life are exposed and we begin to perceive reality and the Spirit of God uses that to change us.

As we teach the Word, the Spirit of God opens a person's mind to the truth. And when this happens it's the most exciting thing in the world. Have you ever experienced the Word of God being taught and suddenly you see things you have never seen before and your heart begins to burn with a sense of gratitude that God is speaking to you?

I can remember learning for the first time that the most important thing in the Christian life was to know and love God. I'd been focusing more on serving God, trying to be effective for him. And yet as a 19-year-old kid I went to church one morning and Psalm 27 was being expounded. When the teacher explained v. 4, it hit me like a bolt of lightning! The Psalmist says, **"One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in his temple."** I realized at that moment I had lost sight of the "one thing," and now God was bringing me back to it. Isn't it exciting when God speaks to you like that?

What we see in vv. 1-8 is the illumination of the mind through the exposition of the Word of God. We sometimes downplay the importance of the mind in changing our life, but no real change can come about in our lives unless our thinking is changed. This is why it's such a tragedy that there is so much ignorance of the Scripture in most of our churches today. Why is that? Some of us have been taught that we really can't trust the Bible in its entirety. We've read articles by so-called authorities that poke holes in the Bible. Or we've bought into the lie our culture feeds us that we should leave the technical stuff to the professionals. But all this leads to an ignoring of God's Word. That's why we're often characterized by apathy and inertia in our spiritual lives.

V. Biblical exposition engages both the mind and the emotions.

But the Scripture not only illumines our mind, it also engages our heart.

"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. 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.' 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" (vv.9-12).

We see here that when the mind is opened up the heart is moved in an authentic way, and once again these emotions are born of the Spirit of God. We see two strong emotions in this story. The first is grief. As the word of God began to sink in the people began to weep out of conviction of sin. This is understandable; they'd lived in disobedience to the word for some time and they were overcome with a sense of the reality of sin. Sometimes the word of God does that. It pierces us. It corrects us. In 2 Timothy, Paul not only says the Scripture is **"God-breathed,"** but it is **"profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness..."**

Usually, if we preachers can get some people to cry we think we're doing a pretty good job! It means somebody's paying attention and taking this seriously. But not Ezra. Ezra and the other leaders went out and tried to get them to stop weeping and start rejoicing. This is the second emotion we see here - joy. Three times they say the same thing: "You're not supposed to be crying, you're supposed to be rejoicing. Why? **Because this day is holy to the Lord.**" This day has been set apart by God for the purpose of rejoicing rather than weeping. What you're doing is inappropriate given what God intended this day to be all about. It's like someone getting up on Christmas morning, walking out into the living room where all the gifts are, and crying. It's inappropriate, unless they didn't get what they wanted. And so these leaders tell the people to go home and have a feast. Nehemiah says, **"The joy of the Lord is your strength."** What a great line! The joy that comes from knowing who the Lord is and what he has done for us is a source of strength. And the only way we know that is through the Scripture.

There are times when our weeping ought to turn into rejoicing. Like these people in the story, if we truly understood who God is and what he's done for us, and we only get that from God's word, our weeping will turn into joy. Why are so many Christians joyless? Why do we think God is more pleased with our weeping than with our rejoicing? Like the bumper sticker that says, "God is back and boy is he mad." Because we don't understand the Scripture. The essence of authentic Christianity isn't weeping but rejoicing. It's not about what we haven't done, it's about what God has done for us. And we only learn that from the Word.

I can remember sitting in church one Sunday. I was struggling with a sense of my own sin and unworthiness. I was really feeling broken. And then the pastor started to preach from the passage in Jeremiah where the Lord is likened to a potter, and we the clay. He described that image and how even though the potter may crush the clay he still cups it in his hands; he holds it and he won't let it out of his control. The greatest sense of comfort and joy came over me. I knew the Lord was dealing with me, but I knew he would never let me go. I had come there weeping, but I left that place full of joy. That's what the Scripture does.

But that's not the end of the story. The exposition of Scripture illumines our mind and engages our heart, but what about our will? What about obedience?

VI. Biblical exposition results in obedience to the Scriptures.

“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. 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. 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.’ 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 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. 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” (vv.13-18).

Here we have a small group of leaders come to Ezra the next day for a small group bible study. They want to take a closer look at this book and, as they do, they make a discovery. They discover an ancient commandment in the law telling them to hold a special celebration during the 7th month called the Feast of Booths. God had told his people that each year on the 15th day of the 7th month he wanted them to hold a week long celebration; to celebrate how he had brought them through the wilderness and provided food and water for them. During that time they'd lived in little makeshift tents made out of tree branches and leaves. He wanted the Jews to come to Jerusalem every year and make these tents and live in them for a week to remember his provision.

The Jews had neglected this commandment for years, but now out of obedience to God's word they prepared to celebrate this holiday again. Their insight led to obedience. The next 13 days were spent in preparation. Can you imagine what this would have looked like to the surrounding people? And so, when the 15th came they were ready and they celebrated the Feast of Booths for a week. Everybody was involved, no one said "I'm not doing that..." And it was a time of great joy and Ezra continued to read from the book of the law each day of the feast. Camping can be fun!

Biblical exposition ought to result in obedience to the Word of God. It should move our will to act. We should go out and do just what the Lord told us to do. And we can do it with great joy. Look at the end of v. 17 where it describes the people as they observed the Feast of Booths, **"And there was great rejoicing."** There is a joy in obedience. Obedience does not have to be drudgery, obedience can be joyful. And when our eyes are on the Lord it will be joyful.

It doesn't really matter how much your mind is informed or your heart is moved; if it doesn't result in your will being submitted it's a waste. I've seen people moved to tears on Sunday who are sleeping with their girlfriends or cheating on their taxes or ignoring a friend in need on Monday. God's word should result in a spiritual housecleaning.

CONCLUSION

So what happens when the word of God is preached? Why is it so important? Because through it the mind is opened up to the awesome realities of God, and then the heart is moved deeply, and finally the will is submitted; obedience becomes a joyful response to what God is doing in our hearts. Being exposed to the Word of God should always involve all three things. When we leave one out we get in trouble. When the mind is informed without the heart being moved we fall into dry, dead intellectualism. When the heart is moved apart from the mind being informed by the Word we fall into emotionalism. And when the will is submitted without either two other things we fall into legalism.

So, church, I implore you today to love the Word of God. Desire it. Revere it. Read it. Understand it. Feel it. And obey it.

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