

"Recipe for Restoration"

Nehemiah 8

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Introduction:

Most of us here this morning probably have some kind of favorite recipe book. One of our favorite books is an old paperback Betty Crocker, and I especially liked it when I first got married, because it explained how to do absolutely everything. I did not even know how to boil an egg, so it took me through it very scientifically, step-by-step. It has our favorite crepe recipe in it. Unfortunately, the book is so old, we now keep it in a Ziploc bag, and the first page we can find is page 103—all of the other pages have disintegrated over the years. I can't even remember what was covered in the first 102 pages, but we do rely on what we have left. One of our others is an old book with the title, "**Watt's Cooking**," and "**Watt**" is spelled "**W-A-T-T**." The book was compiled by the power company down in northeast Georgia. I have no idea where we got it, but this book has our favorite biscuit recipe in it, a recipe for what they refer to as "**Cloud Biscuits**." It is simple, but it works, and after 15 years of trial and error, we have finally found a recipe that we will most likely use for the rest of our lives—and most of you probably also have recipes that you embrace with similar enthusiasm. We love to have instructions that work. We love having a pattern that never fails.

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to the Old Testament book of **Nehemiah**, and this morning I would invite you to consider with me a **RECIPE** for **RESTORATION**, a pattern for coming back to God after a time of being away. I am referring to a great event recorded for us in **Nehemiah 8**, **▶▶PPT▶▶** and in our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 776—Nehemiah 8**.

The event that we are about to consider takes place not too long after the Jewish people had returned from 70 years in Babylonian Captivity—they were basically prisoners of war for 70 years as a punishment from God for ignoring the word of God. The Bible tells us, though, that after seventy years, the people were allowed to go home. The temple was restored under a scribe by the name of Ezra, and the wall was rebuilt under a man by the name of Nehemiah, who served as a governor. In fact, even though they were rebuilding the wall with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other (because of their enemies), the people worked together, and the wall was rebuilt in only 52 days, and that is where we pick up with **Nehemiah 8**. They finish the wall, and this is what happens next. If you will, then, please look with me at the first thing they do after completing the wall. **Nehemiah 8:1-18**...

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, Hilkiah, 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.

As we think back about how the people were restored to God after so many years of being away, I would like for us to look at this almost in terms of it being a recipe, or a pattern, and I would like for us to back up and try to ask ourselves why this passage is even in the Bible—What would God want us to learn from it?

- I. **And as we go back up to the first four verses, what I would like for us to notice, first of all, is that THE PEOPLE HAD A DESIRE TO HEAR—THEY WERE EAGER TO LEARN THE WORD OF GOD. »PPT»**

Based on the previous chapter, some have estimated that this crowd would have been around 50,000 people. And we find in verse 1 that instead of taking a few days off to rest a little bit (after rebuilding the wall), they all get together, they call out to Ezra the scribe, and they demand that Ezra bring out the book of the Law of Moses. In fact, we find at the beginning of verse 1 that all of the people were assembled together as *“one man.”* In other words, there was unity in their purpose—despite their personal likes or dislikes, they were gathered together for a reason, and once they were assembled their request was for Ezra to bring out the Law of God, **“We want the Law! We want the Law!”** They were ready to hear and eager to learn!

Several years ago, we went to a Mallard’s baseball game here in Madison, and for some reason, the crowd got riled up and started chanting for **“more beer.”** I mean, we were in the wrong section! We had never seen that before, and we have never seen it since, but we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were all kind of shrinking down in our seats, and I was just hoping that the Lord did not return at that exact moment—how embarrassing that would have been! The crowd was speaking with one voice. But here in Nehemiah 8:1, we find that they were asking, not for beer, but for the word of God—50,000 people all wanting Ezra the scribe to bring out God’s Law, **“We want the Law!”** They were asking for the Pentateuch—the first five books of what we now know as the Old Testament—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They wanted the Law. They wanted those books that we are sometimes tempted to skim over in our daily Bible reading.

When we think about this situation, we realize that many of these people had perhaps never even heard the Law of God. Perhaps some of the very old had been little children when they were taken into captivity, but many of these people were born in captivity. And yet we find that ***“all the people”*** were there. In **verse 3**, we find that this crowd included not only the men and women, but also, all of those ***“who could understand.”*** In other words, this huge crowd would have included the children. Those children who were old enough to understand were also there. They were not shuffled off into a basement room somewhere to have a little entertainment, but even the children were included in the assembly. If they had the ability to understand, they were there! They were eager to hear and learn the word of God. What impresses me is that we don't need to have a PhD to understand the word of God. We don't need any kind of college degree or even a high school diploma. The number one requirement is that we are eager to learn, ***“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”*** (**Matthew 5:6**).

What also impresses me is that they were not there to see Ezra. I am sure that Ezra was a nice man, but Ezra was not the reason they came together. They were there for the word of God, and in **verse 3**, we discover that the people were assembled from early morning until midday—standing up from roughly 6 a.m. (***“daylight,”*** as the text says literally) until about noon—they were assembled together for roughly six hours! What if we changed our ad in the Yellow Pages this week to say, ***“Sunday Services—6 a.m. 'till noon”***? How many people would that attract? But they were not gathered together for their own personal comfort. How many of us have ever been at a service where the Bible was read aloud for several hours? Most of us have not.

And yet in spite of that, please notice at the end of **verse 3**, that ***“...all the people were attentive to the book of the Law.”*** And so, not only were they there, but they paid attention! They absorbed the words that were being said. They were not thinking about the little kid picking his nose in the front row. They were not thinking about what they were going to eat for lunch. They were not wondering about the flavor of the day. But they listened to the message and paid attention. We then find in **verse 4** that Ezra stood at a wooden podium that they had constructed for this reason—specifically designed so that it could hold the word of God—the only reference to a podium or pulpit in the entire Bible! What an amazing example! They had prepared beforehand for this momentous occasion.

This morning, as we consider this recipe for coming back to God, we learn, first of all, that the people were eager to hear and learn the word of God. This week, let's try to think of some ways we can remind ourselves to follow their example. Several days ago, I got an e-mail from some missionaries in China. Their messages are filtered by the government, so they often write in code—words and phrases that only other Christians would understand. You might remember I shared a message several months ago where they said that ***“Father”*** had scored a ***“touchdown.”*** In other words, as a result of their teaching, someone had obeyed the gospel. Well, last week, they explained in their report that they had started a ***“reading group”*** so that they could come together to study from their ***“favorite English book.”*** Their

“favorite English book” is the Bible, and their “reading group” is a Bible class. This week, let us recommit to studying our “favorite English book.”

II. There is another part of the recipe in Nehemiah 8, and that is, the people not only were eager to learn the word of God, but THEY TREATED GOD’S LAW WITH THE UTMOST OF REVERENCE AND RESPECT.

»PPT»

In verse 5, we notice that he opened the book, and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Perhaps some of you have been in a courtroom, and you know that when the judge enters the room, the bailiff says, “**All rise!**” All of those in the courtroom stand up to show their respect for the judge. In most weddings, we do the same thing for the bride. Nobody cares about the groom, but when we hear the music and see the bride come in the back of the room, we all stand out of respect. We do the same thing at a ball game at the singing of the national anthem. We stand up. Please remember: Many of the people here in Nehemiah 8 were most likely seeing a copy of God’s Law for the very first time. And so, out of their reverence and respect for the Word of God, they spontaneously got up on their feet.

I am so thankful to see members of this congregation (and even little children) who make a point of bringing their own Bibles to our Lord’s Day assemblies. And I know we have pew Bibles, but there is something special about reading God’s word in our own copy of the Scriptures. We treat the Scriptures with respect and reverence. I know we do not worship the paper and the ink—we do not worship the leather binding—but in our hands we are holding the word of God. Let us be careful, then, when it comes to how we treat our Bibles. We try to teach our children not to put their Bibles on the floor—don’t let the Bible get covered up by McDonald’s wrappers—but instead, put it on a shelf, put it on a table, but do not put it on the floor. The Bible is not just any book—it is the word of God!

In verse 6, Ezra the scribe offered a prayer of praise to God. We notice here that the people did not break out in applause, but the people answered, “**Amen! Amen!**”, a word with deep meaning. By saying, “**Amen,**” they were saying, “**We agree with what has been said here today!**” In a similar way, we are not only eager to learn, but we are to treat God’s word with reverence and respect.

III. There is a third basic concept here, and that is, EZRA AND THE LEVITES EXPLAINED THE WORD OF GOD IN A WAY THAT THE PEOPLE COULD UNDERSTAND. »PPT»

In verses 7-8, we find that they explained the Law, they read from the book, and then they translated it to give the sense so that the people understood the reading. As I see it, this remains the goal of preaching even today—to take a passage of God’s word and explain it in a way that people can understand—in a way that means something—in a way that has a chance to change the way we live. We are not here for cute stories or poems, but we are here this morning for the purpose of understanding God’s message.

The people needed some help with the language barrier. After 70 years, many no longer spoke Hebrew, but they spoke Aramaic, a language they had picked up in Babylon. And so they needed the word of God to be translated from Hebrew into Aramaic. In the same way today, we also need to have the Bible translated from Hebrew and Greek into English, and this is a constant process—not because the Bible changes, but because the English language is always changing! In order to understand the Bible, therefore, we need to start with a good and up-to-date translation. But we find here that they also needed an explanation. And what I find very interesting here is that 50,000 people could actually understand God’s Law in the same way. There were not 50,000 interpretations, but they all understood the message together, and they were able to come to the same conclusion. We remember Paul’s words in **1 Corinthians 1:10**, ***“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.”*** The Bible, therefore, was never meant to be confusing, but it can be understood and absorbed. In fact, the word ***“understanding”*** is used six times in this chapter.

IV. As a result of this UNDERSTANDING, let us please also notice that THE PEOPLE WERE DEEPLY TOUCHED AND CONVICTED BY THE WORD OF GOD. **»PPT»**

And we know this because of what happens in **verses 9-12**. In **verse 9**, for example, Ezra had to tell the people to stop weeping. In other words, the people were weeping when they heard and understood the Law of God. Perhaps they realized just how far they had drifted. Perhaps they finally understood that God’s judgment in the Babylonian Captivity was just—that they had deserved the punishment. Perhaps they thought back to all of those years they had gone without any spiritual input. Perhaps they finally understood that they had sinned in the eyes of God.

But if you have read the first five books of the Old Testament, then you know that they are much more than a list of do’s and don’ts. Imagine hearing for the very first time, ***“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”*** Imagine hearing for the first time the story of Noah, the story of Abraham, the story of Isaac, the story of Jacob, the story of Joseph, the story of Moses. Imagine hearing for the first time, ***“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”*** Imagine hearing the story of the Exodus—how God led the people out of Egyptian bondage because they were special to the Lord, that they were not forgotten in a foreign land. Imagine hearing all of that for the very first time. The Bible says that, ***“...the people were weeping when they heard the words of the Law.”*** They were deeply touched by the word of God.

Today, if our hearts are sensitive, then we can also be touched by the word of God. Unfortunately, many people in our society are only looking for the emotional high that a religious experience can provide—and so we find people hopping from church to

church, always looking for a heart-wrenching story, always looking for a spiritual “buzz,” always looking for the best music, the best band, the most expressive drama, the most exciting preacher. Certainly there is nothing wrong with a preacher who doesn’t put you to sleep, but it is definitely more than that! We need to allow our hearts to be open, to be deeply touched by the word of God. We are not looking for entertainment, but we must be looking for God’s word, and we need to be open to it when we hear it. And when it happened to these people, the Bible says that they wept, that they shed tears over their discovery of God’s law.

V. As we come near the end, we see another very important part of this recipe, and that is, THE PEOPLE APPLIED GOD’S MESSAGE TO THEIR OWN SITUATION BY REACTING WITH FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE. **▶▶PPT▶▶**

In other words, God’s message actually meant something. Apparently, they came to the section concerning the Feast of Booths, and they realized that this feast was something they needed to do immediately. This particular feast involved moving out of the house for a week and living in tents—it was a way of remembering the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness after the Israelites had been led out of Egypt. The Feast of Tabernacles was also a very happy occasion as people shared food with their neighbors. It was a way of reconnecting with families, with friends. I would compare it to the week some of us spend at Bible Camp—we camp out in the woods for a change of pace, and it helps us to refocus on what is truly important. We come back home, and we appreciate what we have.

Some people think that God’s word is too hard to understand, too hard to apply to our situation here in Madison. But that is not the case. As Jesus said in **John 14:15**, ***“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”*** Here in **Nehemiah 8**, these people saw what they needed to do, and they did it! This morning, we can follow their example of obedience. When the Bible tells us to do something, do we read it and then debate over whether it is really the right thing to do? Do we read what it says and then wait until we understand the reasons for it before we do it? Do we read what it says and then ask God if He really wants us to do it or not? Do we read what it says and then check with our neighbors to see if that’s what they think we should do? Do we read it and then wait around for a “nudge” from the Holy Spirit? No! We read the word of God, and we do it—even if it has not been done for many years!

Did you notice how long it had been since God’s people had celebrated the Feast of Booths? **Verse 17** says that, ***“The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day.”*** If I have calculated this correctly, this feast had not been celebrated for nearly a thousand years! Apparently, this was something that even David and Solomon had ignored! When we read the Bible and find that we have been disobedient (even if we didn’t know it at the time), the solution is to change what we are doing to match the word of God. Some people, of course, don’t do this. Some people try to change the meaning of God’s word to match the way they’re living. Some people just go looking for a new church. But as the Lord said, ***“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments”*** (**John**

14:15). And as a result, we find at the end of **verse 17** that, “...*there was great rejoicing.*” And so there is happiness in following the word of God.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this particular recipe for coming closer to God, I would simply ask whether there is anything we need to take care of. Are there any sins that we need to confess and step away from? Is there something we know about that we are kind of protecting from the word of God? Is there some area of our lives that we are holding off to the side? Something we know is wrong that we hope God doesn't notice? I am talking to myself first here, but I would suggest that we develop an eagerness to learn, that we treat the word of God with reverence and respect, that we study to come to a deeper understanding, that we allow ourselves to be deeply touched and convicted by God's word, and that we then quickly do whatever it takes to make things right with God. If there is some way we can help you do that, we would encourage you to write it down and pass it to the front, and we can pray about it together as a congregation.

On the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian, the Bible tells us that we need to believe in Jesus, we need to turn away from sin, and we need to allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our past sins—imitating the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. At that point, we start the Christian life. If you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org