

Introduction

We are going to wrap up the NEXT Initiative today by looking again at the Book of Nehemiah. We're going to be in Nehemiah chapter 8. Nehemiah is such an interesting book; I love it so much. You know, today is Palm Sunday. Because we're in the NEXT Initiative, we're not able to celebrate Palm Sunday in a traditional way today, but I was really struck with this thought. Nehemiah, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus Christ, is rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He is building those walls. This struck me that he built the gate that Jesus Christ himself came through on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey. In that moment people all through the city had palm branches, and they were waving them and they were crying out, "Hosannah!" Nehemiah and the people built something that was used for God's purpose to declare the Kingship and to enthrone Jesus Christ before they even knew who Jesus would be. God had a hand in that. Today we're going to look at Nehemiah chapter 8, and this is the question I want us to think about as we look at Nehemiah 8. If we, today, are building something, I want us... I desire us more than anything else to build something that, just as God used the walls and the gates that Nehemiah built to enthrone and lift high Jesus Christ, I want us to think, "How could God use what He is building here to lift high and glorify Jesus Christ?" So I want us to look at Nehemiah 8 and I want us to think, "What is it that God wants and desires from us to build here in this place so that Jesus might be glorified?" So, if you look at Nehemiah chapter 8, this is the chapter where the walls have just been completed. So, they've just finished the job. The walls have been completed, and what do they do the second that the walls are completed? I think that those actions show us and give us a template for how we could see Jesus Christ lifted high, because just as Jesus was lifted high in Jerusalem through the actions of Nehemiah, let's see how Jesus can be lifted high through our actions here at Houston Northwest.

Nehemiah chapter 8: *"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."*

So, if you go read the Book of Ezra, you can get Ezra's perspective on what was happening right here.

"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. 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. 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. 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. 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 worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pellaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places."

So they had Levites spread out among the people so they could explain to them what was being read.

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

"And 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 wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' So the Levites calmed all the people saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

"On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. And they found it written in the Law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, 'Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and 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. And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule."

1. A Community Committed To Scripture. (vv. 2-3)

What did the people do after they had built the wall so that God might use it to eventually enthrone Jesus Christ? I think the first thing that we see, in verse 2 in chapter 8: Do you know what they did? They were committed to the reading of God's Word... to Scripture. They were a community that was committed to hearing it. In fact, it says that they gathered everyone together. They gathered men, women, and anyone who could understand. I'm assuming children. By the way, Moms and Dads, hear me on this. It is okay, in fact it is better than okay... it is recommended, it is right, and it is good that as soon as your kids are old enough, you should bring them in to worship so that they can hear God's Word. Because just as the people there that day heard God's Word, you also and also your children need to hear God's Word. When they see you worshipping, they see you open your Bible, they see you singing, and they see you worshipping God... Do you know what? You are teaching them things that you can teach them no other way. They learn how to worship by watching you worship. And in that place, God's Word is opened, and as God's Word is opened up, in that moment, guess what happened? The people actually stood up. It was like, Ezra was up here... he was elevated... The people were so anxious to hear it. They wanted to get closer to it, almost. They stood up, out of honor, out of expectation to hear it, and later at the end of the chapter, it says that day after day after day after day, Ezra just stood up and he just read from the Book of the Law.

People of Houston Northwest, the Bible matters. We need to know it, we need to study it, and we need to care about it. We need to be a people that are committed to Scripture. If we want to be a people that God can use, we need to know the Word of God. We need to know it, right? We need to be like the people in the Book of Nehemiah that were standing, that were expectant, so that they could hear God's Word read from and taught so that they could know it and apply it into their own lives. If you are a Christian, you may not know it, but this is one of the historic doctrines of the Christian faith: That the Scripture is inspired by God, and because the Scripture is inspired by God, all of it is useful. Christians believe that every Book in the Bible testifies to who Jesus Christ is. And Christians believe that Jesus Christ Himself is the Gospel. Jesus came, He pursued us, He died, He was resurrected... His life encompasses the Gospel, the Good News of

who God is... It all centers around Jesus, and Christians believe that all of Scripture testifies to who Jesus is. If Scripture is the best record, the best testimony, the best picture, the best pointer to show us who God is, in Jesus Christ, we ought to know Scripture. In fact, in Matthew 5, Jesus himself says, *"I did not come to abolish the Law and the prophets, but I came instead to fulfil them."* Why is that? So that we would know that when we read the Book that God has given us, this great gift, whether it be Old Testament or New Testament, we are either seeing in the Old Testament a "looking forward" to who Jesus Christ would be revealed as or, in the New Testament, an unfolding, an unpacking of who God declared Himself to be in Jesus Christ. We need to know the Word of God, because it is God's definitive statement on who Jesus is... on who He is. We need to know the Word. Right? Now, why does that matter? It leads me to two pretty important things. First of all: The people wanted to hear the Word of God. They stood up. They were expectant. They wanted it. Can we get real? I heard one person say, "Yes," so I'm going to take that as a "Yes." (Laughter) Listen. We need to want the Word of God. I'm going to be really frank right now. American Christians are so comfortable that they take the Word of God for granted, and they don't ever open it up and read it and know it. Okay. Here's the thing: Do you know why we don't do that? It's kind of like it's so accessible that we just think, "It's always accessible." You go find someone who has gone without the Word of God, and they will tell you, "Never take it for granted." These people had been in exile. They had not been able to read the Word of God freely. You know what? They just stood there for hours so that they could hear it. They knew how great of a gift it was. Why do you think that the Bible describes itself as honey that is sweet to the taste? ...Because the Word of God is a precious, great gift. It is as breath; it is as life. It describes to us who God is. The people desired that. They wanted that. They wanted it desperately.

I fill my brain with all kinds of useless stuff. Do you do the same thing? I mean, we can tell you all kinds of details about the TV shows that we are watching right now. We can tell you all the plot points; we can give you all that stuff. We can tell you about the different books that we've read. We've got people who say, "Oh, I can show you the top funniest videos on YouTube. I can scroll to them right now. I can show you all that stuff." We know all this useless information, but we don't know the Word of God. Hey, I still have song lyrics stuck in my head from seventh grade that I learned. I mean, songs that I learned and I memorized. I diligently studied so that I could know them. You don't believe me? (Speaking rap-style)

"All right stop, Collaborate and listen—
Ice is back with my brand new invention
Something grabs a hold of me tightly
Flow like a harpoon daily and nightly
Will it ever stop? Yo — I don't know

Turn off the lights and I'll glow—
To the extreme, I rock a mic like a vandal
Light up a stage and wax a chump like a candle
Dance, Go rush to the speaker that booms
I'm killing your brain like a poisonous mushroom,

Deadly, when I play a dope melody
Anything less than the best is a felony
Love it or leave it, You better gain way
You better hit bull's eye, The kid don't play
If there was a problem, Yo, I'll solve it
Check out the hook while my DJ revolves it"

Now look... ((Clapping) No... you should not clap; that's terrible! You should not clap; that's embarrassing. Do you know why? ...Because you know the same stuff, but we can't quote one chapter of Scripture. We know words to songs, but we don't know the Word of God. Why is that? Do you want to know why? ...Because we think knowing the words to Ice Ice Baby is more important than knowing the words to the Sermon on the Mount or Romans 12 or Romans 8 or Ephesians 1. Never let it be said of the people of Houston Northwest that we do not love the Word of God. We've got to get in the Word, study the Word, know the Word. Do you know why we're always telling you to be in a Life Group? It's good for you to have people that you know, but you need to be studying the Word of God in community with other people and be learning how to apply it. The people in Nehemiah wanted the Word of God. Do we want the Word of God? If we want the Word of God, then praise God over that. But if we reject it or we think it's useless or we don't have time for it and we're always pushing it off... then do you know what? We'll get exactly what we ask for because whenever you put the Word of God at arms' length... whenever the moment of need comes... guess what? You hear the voices in your head, but you don't hear the truth from God. We need to have Scripture in our heart. (Clapping) We need it. If we would give ten percent of the energy that we give to other pursuits in our life to knowing the Word of God, God could change hearts.

The people didn't just want it though. Here's the other thing that's crazy to me. It was then presented in such a way that they could understand it. Three times in chapter 8... if you go back and you look at the first half of chapter 8 there you will see that the people wept, not just because they heard the Word of God but because they heard it in a way they could understand. If you're a teacher of the Word of God and you are here today, I want you to hear me... if you are a Life Group leader, a deacon, elder, or maybe you're a Bible study leader, or maybe you're just teaching it to your kids... Listen to me. You had better teach the Word of God in a way that they can understand it. Teaching the Word of God is a privilege, and you should never, ever teach it in such a way that people cannot understand it. You might think, "Whoa, that's pretty easy." Right? Try teaching the Word of God to kids. Try teaching substitutionary atonement to six-year-olds. Right? That's a big deal but it matters when we do it. The teaching of the Word of God is not so that you can show off your knowledge, it's not so that you can sound smart, it's not so that you can use big words... It's so that you can make the Word of God applicable and matter to the people who are hearing the Word of God. It's good to go deep and to know those things, but do you know what? If you know the deep truths and you can't put them in a simple way that a third-grader can understand them, you don't really know them yet. You've got to be able to make it clear and easy to understand.

W.T. Conner who taught Theology at Southwestern Seminary for about 37 years had a great quote. I love this. When he was talking about people who were teaching the Bible in a way that it couldn't be understood... he was a very plain-spoken man. He lived most of his life in rural Texas. They said to him, "Why do you teach Theology so simply? Why don't you use more big words?" And he said this: "Muddy water is no sign that the well is deep." I like that, right? Just because you can use big words doesn't make it any more impressive or any more important. Right? This is the thing. We need not only need to teach the Word of God, but we need to teach it in such a way that we can understand it. That is a challenge for each and every one of us. When you're explaining it to your friends, you're explaining it to your peers and to your coworkers... teach it to them in a way that they understand, and it will move them to tears because the Word of God, when it is understood, it changes lives which leads me to the next point.

2. A Church Committed To Obedience. (v. 12)

We don't just need to be people who want to hear and know the Scripture, but we also need to be people who will act on the Scripture. We need to be people of obedience. Chapter 8 verse 12:

"And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them."

So they understood it. So guess what they did? Then they went out and they acted on it. Look at verse 14:

"...they found it written in the Law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem..."

In other words, they heard a command that was given, they understood it, so then they acted on it. The world is filled with people who know what this Book says and don't do anything about it. It's not enough to know it. We actually have to obey it. The second thing we need to be... not just people who are committed to Scripture but people who are committed to obedience of Scripture. Why obedience of Scripture?

You know, as we were going through Galatians in the Freedom Story series, one of the things that I noticed that just kept coming up... it was so potent and powerful in my own life... was the idea of applying the grace of God. This is the way it works. So I've shared with you before that one of the big things that I struggle with personally is just finding my identity in Christ. I've shared with you that it's easy for me to seek the approval of people, and if I don't get the approval of people I start to get weighed down and I feel like, "Man, I'm a failure..." and this sort of thing. When that happens, let me just tell you how that works. Your situation is probably different, and your struggles are probably different. This is what happens: You know, I do something and I am seeking the approval of other people and I don't get it, and thoughts enter my mind and this is what they sound like: "They think you're a loser. They really don't think you're very good at your job, and people probably are going to stop coming to church." You start to have these thoughts; you start to think, "I'm a failure." Now, prior to learning how to apply the Gospel, let me show you what would happen. It is then I would take those thoughts, and they would just lead into this downward spiral. I would begin to believe those thoughts. Then once I believed that, then I would start to say, "Well, because I believe that and because I think that's true about me..." then I would actually then go seeking the approval of other people, right? So, I'm disempowering myself; I'm actually feeding the very thing that I should be running from. Then I create a cycle. I build up those neural pathways, those spiritual pathways, where the only way that I'm going to be satisfied or happy is seeking the approval of others, and I build this cycle, where I have to seek the approval of others.

What does it mean to apply grace? What does it mean to be obedient? I'm going to tell you what it is. Those thoughts enter your mind and do you know what happens? When you know what the Word of God says and that thought comes into your brain, it comes to the point... Instead of saying, "I'm a failure and that's right. I need to go to try to get someone to tell me I'm good enough, I'm smart enough and people like me." Actually what you do is you do this: "Wait a minute... what did Ephesians 1 say?" Ephesians 1 says this: It says that "from before the foundations of the earth, I was chosen in Him. I was predestined to be a son." Boom! And instead of taking me down, I go right up because what happens then is I replace the emotions of the heart and the lies of the enemy that have entered my mind, and I replace them with truth from Scripture.

A couple of weeks ago I was standing up here to preach. Before I preached I was having one of these days, one of these moments, and those things were kind of weighing me down. It was a different sort of attack though. One of the ladies who was leading worship in here on that day, she was like, "Hey, how are you doing?" You know, I just spilled it. I was like, "I'm really struggling. I've kind of got these thoughts going on." Do you know what she did? She did not give me a pep talk. Do you know she did? She quoted Scripture to me. She said, "I just want you to hear this Word from Scripture right now." Boom! She just threw it out there. Immediately I went, "You're right." It just changed the countenance of my heart. I was able to stand up and to proclaim God's Gospel in faithfulness, because I knew that what she had said was accurate and true because it was from God's Word. Listen to me. You do not need a pep talk. You need the Scripture spoken to you. You need to preach it to yourself; we need to preach it to one another because that is what changes hearts and minds. Now, look what happens. When I walk in obedience to that, then guess what? Then that draws me into a new cycle. Instead of this downward cycle of dependence and trying to make other people make me feel better, I go into an upward cycle where I depend on God's Word to declare what my identity is, and then I move into a cycle of obedience. Every time that those lies come and every time that temptation comes, what I do is I battle it with God's Word. It replaces it with truth

in my mind, and I start going into a new cycle and creating a new cycle of obedience and dependence. Now you tell me... What would be on fire for Jesus in this city? A church that is always just falling into its old ways or a church that knows the Word of God and applies it and lives in obedience to it? Which one of those would change this city? It's a no-brainer, right? We need to be people that know the Word of God but don't just know it so that we can quote it, but we also know it so that God can use it to change our hearts and change the actions that we are participating in. We need to be obedient to the Word of God. Now... this is the crazy part: I can only obey what I can understand. So, the Word of God has to be taught. It has to be taught in a way that is understandable, and then once the people have heard it in a way they understand, then we have to act on it. Then we start speaking that to one another.

3. A Community Committed to Witness. (v. 16)

Now, the last thing. This is where it gets really wacky. Okay? So, a people that are committed to the Scripture, and a people that are committed to the obedience to the Scripture... Verse 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."

Why are they building booths? I'm glad that you asked. Okay. (Laughter) This is called the Festival of Booths. It's kind of a fun word to say. You know... "booth." You don't say it a whole lot. But the Festival of Booths... what was that? Okay? It's not the Festival of Booze. I know some of you are like, "Wait a minute... What? It sounds kind of exciting." No. The Festival of Booths... So what's happening here is this: The people are to celebrate a Festival once a year for a week. What it does is it is a reminder that God brought them through the wilderness and provided for them. So what they would do is they would build little lean-tos and they had to live in them for a week, outside of their house. So they would get some sticks and they would build this lean-to on the side of their house and add some leaves, and they would live in the lean-to right outside of their house. So my Lazy Boy is a hundred feet that way... my internet is a hundred feet that way. Right? The nice warm inside is a hundred feet this way, and I live here for a week. Why? ...Because in that obedience I remember that God provided. They would end of Festival of Booths by all marching in a processional into the city, and then there would be a drink offering, a water offering, that was poured out and they would remember how God provided water from a rock in the desert.

Now why does that matter? ...Well, if you have forgotten... there are all kinds of other people around them... people that do not believe. Right? They are building their booths. I want you to think how weird that would be. Here's my house and I'm living outside of it for a week in my booth, and here comes Jim on his way to work. "So... I'm in the booth, again... Day 3, Wow! Kind of wild, right?" He just keeps doing that, over and over and over. If you think that's weird, wait until you're on the fourth year of doing it. "Yeah, you know, my neighbors are so bizarre; every year for about a week they live in this little lean-to outside their house. I don't understand it." Why is that? This is the thing I want us to understand. Obedience to the Word of God will always be weird. Now listen to me. God does that for a reason. Do you know why God makes obedience to the Word weird? ...Because weirdness in obedience leads to witness. I'm going to say that again, "Weirdness in obedience leads to witness."

This is the way it works. Let me put it into a contemporary situation. If you're a high school student or a college student, there will come a moment when your faithfulness to the historic teaching of the Scripture regarding sexual behavior will be tested. Right? And if you decide to be pure and decide to say, "I'm going to wait until marriage to have sex because this is what Christianity teaches: Sex is a beautiful, holy thing... it's an awesome thing but it is to be saved for the marriage relationship." If you are faithful to that teaching, let me tell you what. People are going to say things about you, but you may get the opportunity to tell them about Jesus. You think it's weird as a college student or a high school student? What if you find yourself dating at 25, 35, or 45, and you decide to be faithful to that? Guess what? That's weird to a lot of people, but do you know what? It's also a place where your weirdness lets you have the ability to witness to who He is because whenever you decide to be holy... and it's not just about sex. Right? It's the way that you

use your money, the way that you handle yourself in your business, the way that you decide to be honest instead of being deceptive... the way that we manage ourselves in life is designed, by intention, to make us weird. Sometimes when we read this and we go, "I'm sure God didn't mean that because if I did what this Book says right now, I would stand out and look a little weird." Yeah... That's on purpose. You're supposed to stand out, so that way whenever people see you, "Why are you doing that? Are you trying to judge me? Are you trying to look down on me? Are you trying to make me feel like I'm less than a human? Why are you doing that right now?" "No... The reason that I am doing that is so that you will know that I am being faithful to what I believe about who God is, and you are free to agree with me or not, but I have to be faithful to what the Word of God teaches." So, when you do that, it lets you witness and point to Him.

Scripture, obedience, witness. Scripture, obedience, and witness. Those are the three things that the community is committed to on the day that they built the walls, and that's what God used to later have that same place be the place where Jesus Christ was enthroned on Palm Sunday. Scripture, obedience, and witness. That's the same thing that God can use in this place: Scripture, obedience, and witness. It sounds a lot like Gospel. Grow. Go. We hear the Word of God, we apply the Word of God and its grace to our lives, and then we go and we carry that wherever we go into the world.

This is my challenge. This is the way that we're going to end this, and this is how we're going to draw this series to a close. This is what I want you to hear. If you are not in the Word of God, get in the Word. If you know the Word but you are not obeying it and applying it, obey and apply it. And if you are avoiding obedience to the Word of God so that you do not look awkward or odd in the world, then shame on you. It's time to be weird so that people can ask you questions so you can witness to who Jesus Christ is. It's time for Scripture, obedience, and witness because that is what God has called the Church to be.

So let me tell you how we're going to respond to this today. We're going to respond by taking a family meal. You know, I think it's really cool that they gathered together and they hear the Word of God... it's sort of like this consecrated moment where they say, "Hey, we're all in this together. We're going to stand expectantly. We're going to hear the Word of God." Well guess what? The thing that we center around, our stack pole, that we gather around as a community is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the great and powerful symbol that God gave us to remember the Gospel, is the Lord's Supper. So here in a moment we're going to gather at the table and we're going to take Communion, and this is what we're going to do. We're going to eat the bread, we're going to drink the cup, and as we do that, we're going to remember the sacrifice that was given that made a way for you and for me. That's a family meal. We're going to say, "We're all in this together." In doing that what we are saying is, "Lord, we remember the grace that You've given. Now, Lord, may we apply that to all of our lives: in reading Your Word, in being obedient to Your Word, and in carrying that witness out."

This is what I want to do. I want to just pray over us one more time. As we gather to take the Lord's Supper, some of us that are ready and are prepared, we're going to bring our NEXT Initiative commitment cards, and we're going to drop them in those glass vases that are there on the table. Some of us that either already have brought those or are maybe are not ready yet, that's fine. You can either drop them in the mail tomorrow or do whatever it is that the Lord is leading you to do. I want you to be obedient to God's Spirit in this moment. We want this to be a moment of worship where we say, "God, this place that we are building is not about us, but it is about Your fame, it's about Your name, and it's about us reflecting You back to the world. So, let's pray together and let's just ask God one last time to consecrate our hearts, and then we'll respond together at the table.

"Lord, thank you for Your Word. Thank you, Lord, for the fact that we need to know Your Scripture. God, thank you for the fact that we need to be obedient to Your Scripture. God, thank you for the fact that in knowing Your Word and being obedient to the Word, God, it makes us an odd people, a bizarre people, a

What Are We Building? | Nehemiah 8:1-18 | April 13, 2014

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different people that the world looks at and asks questions so that then we can then point and be a witness to You. God, give us the words so that our people might be able to effectively declare what your Gospel is. God, may we be able to speak grace, and may we be able to tell people about the cross. God, may we be able to tell people about the empty tomb, and Lord, may we in all things, always, point back to You. God, we pray this and we ask it in the name of Your Son Jesus, for Him all glory and honor. Amen."