

This evening we're gonna look together at Nehemiah chapter eight, the word of our God. 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 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 can 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, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Mosiah. On his right hand, and Petodiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashun, Hashbadana, Zachariah, and Messalun. Masalam 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 and amen and lifting up their heads, and they bowed their heads, lifting up their hands, and they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. And Yeshua, Benai, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akku, Shabethai, Hadia, Masa, Sia, Kelita, Azariah, Jezebel, Hanan, Peliah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law. While the people remained in their places, 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 God. 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 priest 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 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 captivity made booths and lived in 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 many, 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. Nehemiah chapter eight is one of the most relevant passages of the word of God for Christ's church today. In the book of first Samuel, we read that the word of God was rare in those days. During the ministry of the life

of the prophet Amos, we read that there was a famine of hearing the word or words of the Lord. How relevant this is for our own day. What we experience by God's grace and love in our own congregation is very unique across much of Christendom. For there has been a laying aside of the word, even a jettison of the scriptures. In worship, in ethics, in all dimensions of life, many in the church have done what they think is right in their own eyes because of a neglect, a disregard of the holy scriptures. So this passage is a preeminent passage for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in every day. In Nehemiah's day, but down to our own. In it, we learn of the great blessing of the teaching and the hearing. of the word of God. We learn of the power of God's

word to bring about change and transformation, to bring life and renewal and refreshment in the people of God, so that the people of God walk not only in the ways of the Lord, but enjoy fellowship and communion with him, for we have been made for such. We've been made that we might know him and enjoy him forever. And so as we look at this passage for a few moments, I'd like for us to look at it along three sections of this passage, beginning the first eight verses of Nehemiah chapter eight, where we have a call to the scriptures. Remember, perhaps it was last

week, maybe it was the week before, we saw of Ezra's own commitment to the word of God. Actually, when we studied Ezra, several weeks back, not just two weeks ago, remember in Ezra chapter seven, verse 10, how that he gave himself to study the word of the Lord, to understand it, to do it. And here we find Ezra making his first appearance in the book of Nehemiah. And what an appearance it is. is the great assembly of the people of God are gathered, not at the temple. Remember in the

book of Ezra and in Kings and Chronicles, we read where the word of God was lost in the temple. It was found during the reign of Josiah. But here we find the word of God being read by the people and by the leaders as they gather at the water gate. This is a different section of the wall and of Israel, not so much at the temple, but in the mainstream of life. This has some bearing and significance, that the word of God is not just for temple study. It's not just to be studied on Sundays, but it's something that impacts our whole lives, our thinking, our living, our doing, our commerce. As they gather this day on this, during the seventh month, and they construct this grand platform, literally the Hebrew means a tower. And it must have been a massive pulpit, maybe larger than even the marble pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, because not only was Ezra there, but we read of 13 leaders up there with him on this wooden towered platform. and the people are flocking to Jerusalem. They're described as having true unity. There's true solidarity. There is a picture as they come together as one man with earnest and desire to hear the word of God, to have the scriptures read to them. We find their attentive response to the scriptures as the scriptures are read to them. We read that it was designed for both men and women and all who could understand. Here, the Word of God has such life and bearing on each of our lives. And upon the little ones, in our families, and in our homes, all who can understand, each who can listen, there is great value for the Word of God. And we find such a great and an incredible response And he, that's referring to Ezra the scribe, read from it, now that is the book of the law of Moses, this is verse three, facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday. And 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. Here's the antidote to the ailments, the hemorrhaging that the church face. Is it not found in the balm and truth of God's word? Has not the Lord laid up for us treasure upon treasure? gem upon gem of truth and glory of who our God is, of life and instruction and encouragement and hope and strength as we get into his word, as we hear it, as we allow it to also get into us and change us and transform us. This is such a picture here of that power of the word of God. We read in the book of Hosea chapter four where the prophet cries out on behalf of the Lord as his mouthpiece. Hosea chapter four verse six, my people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge. God has made us that we might know him, that we might know his word, that we might be sustained by the very word of God. It is life giving, it is sustenance to our souls. And here we're reminded even

in Deuteronomy chapter six, that great passage that speaks of the centrality of God's word in the life of the covenant community of God's people and even of in families. How that the word is to be central. It is to affect what we think and how we live our lives. And the New Testament carries the importance of the mind that God has given us, that we might learn, that we might study, that we might listen and receive his glorious word. And this is set in contrast to much of paganism of Nehemiah and Ezra's own day, where there's kind of just that mindless superstition. that is the mark of paganism, but the mark of the children of God. Our minds set on the truth of the word of God. There is a royal reception of the written word of God and of the scroll. And there's, In this passage, there's stress upon the idea of understanding. I've begun to mention it here already. In verse two, all who could understand. In verse three, a similar phrase, those who could understand. Down in verse seven, they help the people to understand the law. while the people remained in their places, and we'll come back to that in a moment. Verse eight, there's an explanation of the law of God, clearly, a sense of it, so that the people understood the reading. And then in verse 12, and all the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them. Many look to this passage of Nehemiah 8 and conclude that it is a key chapter in describing the people of God as a people of the book. In my library, there are a few books. Some of you may have more books than I. Many of those books are very inspiring. I was looking at an incredible sermon written by a minister of our own congregation of a former day. So moving and inspiring. But we have God's inspired book, his breathed out book to us of truth and of power and of life that if we take up and read, if we listen to like those forefathers of ours in Nehemiah chapter eight, we shall be changed and transformed. The word of God always leads to a clear thinking and understanding of who God is and what God is like. As we read his word, we become more God-ward in our direction and our focus, just as the people here. Look at verse six, how that the word of God then leads to an understanding of God, which leads to the worship of God. Look at the result of him having read the word of God. As the word of God was above the people, it doesn't mean just This platform was above the people in height, but in esteem and value, they so viewed the word of God. Verse six, Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. There's a new, renewed understanding of who God is. And all the people answered, amen. Amen, a genuine expression from their heart that this is true, that this is so. They lifted up their hands, they bowed their heads, they worshiped the Lord

with their faces to the ground. For the word of God always exposes its light upon our need and the darkness that is inherent in our own souls. Part of their understanding as well corresponds with the way in which the word of God was clearly explained. While there are 13 people with Ezra up on this pulpit podium tower, there are also 13 people among the people. And what are they doing? Verse eight, and they read from the book, from the law of God clearly. and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. They made, there was reading of the scripture from the platform, from the pulpit, but there was also some reading and explaining, some teaching clearly. of the sense, of the meaning, of the importance of this truth of God's word that ought to be distinct and clear to the people of God. Reading the word of God is of much profit privately, personally. It's of good value as families gather together in the home. as we gather in worship for the word of God to be read. The public reading of the word of God we know is a means of grace. It is indeed a tremendous thing. But it is this explanation of the word, the clear sense of it that God also uses in bringing the truth of his word to bear. So we have the calling of the word here, and I'll look at these next few sections a little more quickly. In verses nine to 12, there's a call to delighting in the Lord. The Lord is our portion. He is our inheritance. He is the one who is our satisfaction. The one who is truly our delight. More than the passing fancies of this world. More than the past. I'm trying to think what it was in Chronicles of Narnia. Was it Turkish delight? In one of C.S. Lewis' books, this world promises a delight, but it isn't something that is enduring. It's not something that is lasting. The end result of the word of God. is that the people of God experience true joy. Perhaps you've been in a worship service where the word of God is made clear to you. Maybe you went into the service with kind of your shoulders hung down. You were weighed and burdened by the concerns, affairs, problems of this world, and yet, As the word is taught and clearly explained, you meet the living Lord, you're renewed, you come out strengthened, you come out with a new song in your heart. There is spiritual joy that the Lord gives. This day was a day that indeed was special. It's described as a day that is holy. This word holy is a word that is described as something that is set aside for the Lord, for his use. I know I've used this illustration over the years. I've been in our fellowship together, but you women have perhaps special china, special plates, a special cabinet to put these special plates. You have maybe a special box in which you put your nicer utensils. These things are set

aside for a special, a holy use, as it were. Well, this day was a holy day in which the people are now set aside for the Lord. to live for Him and to grow in their knowledge and love of Him. And as you have a chance, we don't have time tonight, but you might wanna look at Psalm 96 or Psalm 99 or Isaiah 35, in which the joy of the Lord, these passages are full of the joy of the Lord that comes from a true understanding of who God is and what He has done. that a result is not just rejoicing, but indeed it is strength. They were instructed not to grieve, not to weep. They were weeping, they were grieving, they were brokenhearted over their own sin, because the word of God does that to us if we truly receive it. But it was a sweet time of rejoicing. They're instructed to find their joy in the Lord. And the God who is the great God who forgives us our sins, who renews and who restores us, in this well-known passage, do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord, and that's the covenant name of God, is your strength. I know there are many sermons and lessons on this truth and promise. I'll just say briefly that as we read the word of God, as we meet our living God in and through his word, it does lead to joy. And that joy gives us a boldness, a freedom, an ability to have our eyes focus upon Him and the good purposes that He has for us instead of focusing on the horizontal around us as our eyes are fixed on the beauty and glory of our God as it were in the vertical. Well, finally, we just have a couple minutes, this third section, a call to a great feast. Verses 13 through 18. God wants us not to be merely hearers of his word, but by his grace, those who are doers. God has not only given us his word that we might know who he is and what he has done, but that by that truth, we might be changed to live for him and for his glory. And we do so not out of a legalistic obedience, but it is an evangelical obedience because of Christ and because of the gospel that we seek to live out the truth of his word. So as they study God's law, his word intentionally, we find that it's not just the priest not just the Levites, but we read in this section that it is, verse 13, the heads of fathers' houses of all the people. There is a role for those men and those who are also head of houses to have a spiritual responsibility in understanding and leading their families in the worship of the Lord and in hearing his word. And as they were continuing to study the word of the Lord and his word and good law, they discovered something. Perhaps you've read God's word and made a discovery of something you've left off, perhaps in your own life, or something that you were doing that perhaps you should not be doing. Well, they left off the camping out element of the festival of booths, the feast of booths that was a memorial of the time of the people of God in the wilderness. In Leviticus 23

verse 43 and other references in Leviticus 23, there is a call that the people of God would go and live in these booths Now, my point is this, that scripture is to be a guiding principle of our lives. We're to order our lives by the word of God. That is part of what sola scriptura that we affirm means. Scripture is our supreme, our primary, our only and final authority in what we believe, our faith, but also it is in our practice, how we order and live our lives, how we seek to worship God and live our lives for his glory. in praise. And so as they made this discovery that they had neglected this practice, they picked it right back up joyfully. I'm sure it was quite a sight. I don't know if you've been to a place where there are many tents around. You could think of a campground. You could think of perhaps certain cities where there is a proliferation of various tents that people are living in, perhaps, but they had tents beside their houses, in the court of the temple, at different intersections of their city. People built and lived in these tents as a reminder of the wilderness, and a reminder of how God provided for them. and a reminder of their need of God to sustain them. So the takeaway here for us as we transition into prayer is what is your relationship with the word of God? Does your Bible need some dusting? Are you allowing, do you gather and worship attentively, eager to hear the word read and explained in our homes, in our families? Are we people of the book there where we gather around the scriptures and allow God to speak to us through his word, by his spirit? Are we as those who are head of houses, are we providing good and loving care and leadership for those in our homes and families concerning the word of God? The plea of this passage is that we might be people of the book. We find that as the church of the Lord Jesus becomes increasingly people of the book, that there is not only individual change, but there is renewal, there is reformation. As that renewal and reformation continues, as God works its way into the minds and hearts and lives of his people, it becomes a greater witness to the world. that light of Christ to a world in darkness, and more are drawn to the Lord Jesus by the Spirit of God as the word goes out, and a reformation occurs, perhaps by His mercy, only by His mercy and grace. So, as we begin our prayer time, let's begin with praising God for who He is, that He is a God who has spoken. He's not left us in the dark. Let's praise Him for His word. And let's just bring our general praise to Him for the joy that we now have in the Lord our God. So let's just pray together as one people, one man as they were gathered here, that we might come to the Lord in united prayer of praise. So pray aloud. We'll pray all together. We'll pray one person audibly

at a time, and let's bring our joyful exultation to our God. Let us pray.