

The Surprising Supremacy of Preaching Part 2: The Purpose of Preaching

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Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the ninth chapter of the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 9, continuing a message we began last week so this is the second part of a two-part message. We've last week resumed our study of the book Ezra/Nehemiah. We had taken a couple of months off and so we needed to get back into this text and look forward to finishing out, Lord willing, these next few chapters 9 through 13 in weeks to come. We saw last week, though, that in Nehemiah 8 and 9 and 10 actually, we have the account of one of the greatest revivals in biblical history; nothing less than a spiritual awakening of the people of God occurs in these pages.

So in 445 BC under the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah, we witness a dramatic movement of God's Spirit upon God's people. It is a radical reformation, as it were, extraordinary repentance. The people of God in a dramatic corporate way repent before the Lord. The catalyst for this revival is the preaching of Ezra, an extended preaching service, a four-hour sermon, four hours of the preaching of God's word sets into motion this mighty movement of the Spirit of God, the preaching of Ezra and his associates. So it's not the man, it's the message. It is the preached word that is the central focus of these chapters and what we see is the preaching that begins in chapter 8 is continuing to manifest its powerful impact in chapter 9 and chapter 10 so that the preaching service that started on the first day of the seventh month, 445 BC, is continuing to have dramatic forceful impact upon the people of God over the weeks that follow. And so what we've called this message and when we started it last week, "The Surprising Supremacy of Preaching." We noted that it is, in some ways, it's quite odd that we gather together and sit and listen to one man speak. Most biblical churches are doing this this morning around the world, gathering together to hear the word of God preached, and this is God's way, this is God's way of blessing. It's, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, it's the foolishness of preaching through which God chooses to manifest his wisdom, the wisdom of God made known through the foolishness of preaching. It doesn't make sense to the unbeliever. Sometimes it doesn't make sense to us and yet this is God's way, and when we look back at biblical history, we see that the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah in these chapters serves as a watershed. Before this moment in biblical history, everything was different. After this moment in biblical history, everything will be changed. We see the stunning force of the preached word. Now this isn't always what happens. Obviously, of course, most of

the time the preaching of the word is not attended by this kind of force but this is the means that God has given for us to experience his power and his presence.

I mentioned it's a watershed and I shared last week the historical significance of Ezra's ministry. He was viewed by the Jews who followed him as the second Moses because he brought the law of God back to the people of God, so he was like Moses who had originally given the law of God to the people of God. After his preaching ministry, the Jews became in a new way the people of the book. They had always been and yet they were in a new and distinct way even more people of the book. It had not only historical significance but liturgical significance. It radically affected the worship of the Jewish people and us who stand in the train of this movement of God. Liturgically, the preaching of Scripture moves to the center of the worship of God's people at this moment and thereafter. Before, the temple had been the center and so the sacrificial system was the center of worship. It's not displaced entirely at this point. No, that won't happen until Jesus comes and fulfills it, but we have in this movement of God in Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10, we have this shift of emphasis where now it becomes clear that God intends to rule his people, to work in the lives of his people through the preaching of the word. And so that's why the title, "The Surprising Supremacy of Preaching." The preaching of the word will become the center of this Sabbath celebration of the Jews hereafter. In fact, the synagogue, the whole development of the synagogue system in Jewish life followed from the force of this movement of God. The people of God must gather on the Sabbath to hear the word of God preached after this.

So it really was a watershed in the life of God's people and so it remains instructive for us. This is how God works in the lives of his people. So what I want to do, basically our text technically according to what is on the internet when you look up this sermon is 9:1 because it's the transition between chapter 8 and chapter 9, but really it's chapter 8 leading into chapter 9, and to really feel the effect and force of it, I think we need to read all of chapter 8 today into chapter 9, verse 1. So let's read the Scriptures together and what I want you to think about as we're reading is the preaching of the law of God. In fact, it's striking that the force that happens here is not the preaching as it were of the New Testament gospel. It's not being given. This is the preaching of the law of God and we can see from context that he was actually preaching through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and clearly part of the passage of Leviticus is evident in what we see happen in chapter 8 when there's this renewal of how they are to worship the Lord in the Feast of Booths. That's Leviticus 23 being understood and preached on, and I say that because isn't it striking to think about the fact that it is the preaching of the law of God that brings about this revival.

I mean, I was reading R. C. Sproul, an article he'd written on the law of God in which he says, he quotes Psalm 119:97 where the Psalmist says, "O how I love thy law!" And Sproul writes if you stop and think about that, isn't that astonishing? The law of God? O how the Psalmist loves the law of God. Isn't the law that which restricts our freedom? Isn't it the law of God which limits our choices? Isn't it the law of God which brings such compelling conviction of our sin? Isn't it the law of God which weighs down upon the soul? And yet the Psalmist says, "O how I love Your law!" We get a window into why

the Psalmist loves the law in this preaching event in Nehemiah chapters 8 to 10 because the law of God doesn't merely tell us the do's and don'ts of God's will, the law reveals to us the character of God, what makes the law beautiful. And the Psalmist goes on in Psalm 119 to say, "O how I love thy law! It is my delight. Sweeter than honey to my taste is the law of God." How can that be? And when you look at the law of God, you see the revelation of the will of God, this is what God wills for us, and you not only see that, you see the revelation of the character of God. God wills this for us because this is what he is like. The law of God reveals the goodness of God, the holiness of God, the beauty of God, the righteousness of God. The loveliness of God is revealed in the law of God when the eyes are opened to see it rightly.

So the law of God, the preaching of the law of God. So listen for all the times the word "law" is repeated as we read. Nehemiah 8:1,

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, Hilkiyah, 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. [They come back for another preaching service here.] 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.

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them.

Let's read verse 2 as well,

2 The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your word and we thank You that it is that which reveals Your glory to us. We pray that You even now would open the eyes of our hearts, that You would for those that are still in darkness, remove the blinders from their eyes that they might see and behold wonderful things from Your law. And for those who have had those blinders removed, Lord, we confess our senses are still dull. We need Your grace to open afresh the eyes of our heart that we might see more clearly the beauty of who You are and the glory of Your Son. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

"The Surprising Supremacy of Preaching," the subtitle would be, "The Purpose of Preaching" today. The purpose of preaching. You remember last week, I said there were three points we were going to cover and we covered the first two last week in this passage. We talked about the place of preaching, that preaching is to be given prominent place in the worship of God. We saw the preaching lasted four hours. It was expository preaching. They read the Scriptures and they explained the Scriptures to those who could understand, and then that happened again the second day and apparently all throughout the Feast of Booths which was an eight day celebration. And we're going to see when we get into chapter 9, they're going to again have several hours of preaching again. So the

place of preaching is to be at the center of worship. We noted that's why the pulpit is in the center of Evangelical Reformed churches because the word is to be in the center. God reigns over his people through his word.

So we talked about the place of preaching, we also talked about the pattern for preaching in Ezra and his ministry and those who helped him who were expositing the word, making the sense clear to the people, and today we want to look at the purpose of preaching. So the theme of today's message is the purpose of preaching. The surprising supremacy of preaching is seen in the purpose of preaching. So there are going to be two, basically a twofold purpose. You could say it's two purposes or it's one purpose really in two parts. The first that we're going to share is not as obvious to the initial reading, but to the careful student it is clear. The second is more obvious but both are essential and fundamental and evident in the text. So the twofold purpose of preaching. First is the purpose of preaching is to unveil the glory of God. This is the purpose of preaching, to unveil the glory of God. The second purpose of preaching we're going to look at later in the message is to transform the people of God. So the purpose of preaching is to unveil the glory of God and to transform the people of God. This is God's means through which he unveils his glory. In unveiling his glory, he re-establishes his rule over his people because that's what happens, when we see his glory truly and respond to it rightly, we are transformed. So it is really two parts of one reality. The purpose of preaching is to unveil the glory of God and in so doing that which is a corollary from it, flows from it, inevitably is transformation of the people of God.

So the first, though, first point this morning in this twofold purpose, the purpose of preaching is to unveil the glory of God. I mention this isn't as obvious in the text when you first look at it because you don't have Nehemiah as he's writing and recounting for us the preaching of Ezra, you don't have him describing, you know, like some kind of manifestation of the Shekinah glory of God or anything like that, but you have him describing the effects of the manifestation of the glory of God. So we see this, the glory of God, in a sense, through its effects. It's like we see the shadow cast and we know that the glory has been there. The shadow could not be there without the glory being there.

What are the effects? Well, the effects are extreme conviction of sin. The people of God are overwhelmed with the conviction of sin. We're going to see this in chapter 8 and in chapter 9. In chapter 8, we see their emotional response, their wholehearted response to the preaching of the law of God. In verse 9, when Nehemiah and Ezra have to call out to the people and say, "'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." They're weeping because as they hear the law of God, they are seeing the character of God set on display and they're seeing how far they come short of the character of God and the will of God. So as the words of the law, he goes on to say in verse 10 and 11 two more times, two more imperatives. First imperative in verse 9 was, "Do not mourn or weep." But then also in verse 10 he says, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." Verse 11, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." Three times he's exhorting them to not be grieved or to mourn. The people were overwhelmed. In fact, when you look at the language carefully like in verse 11, "So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be

still," the idea of the word "calmed" and the word "be still" in the Hebrew pictures like kind of an uproar of wailing that the people were silencing. In fact, that word when it says, "be still" means "be silent, be quiet."

So they are convicted by the Lord that this is to be a moment of joy, not mourning. There's so much wonderful implications in that, that even though to come into the presence of God is to be exposed for who you are, to see your sin in a new light, to see the incredible malignancy and ugliness of it, when you truly come to the Lord and submit to him, the end result will be joy, joy unspeakable, full of glory. To be right with God is the happiest place to be in the world, and so to be convicted and exposed by the glory of God is the necessary first step in being healed, and so what we're seeing here is that the preaching of the law of God had unveiled the glory of God in such a way that the people were overwhelmed emotionally by what they heard.

And this conviction continued. Now they're told, "Listen, it's not the time to grieve. Go home and enjoy. I mean, go home and cook wonderful meals and share with those around you and celebrate because we're returning to God today." And then they read the next day verses 13 and following, they read that the Feast of Booths which they had been regularly celebrating, they realized for the first time, they were reading in Leviticus 23 around verse 40, they realized that for years the people of God though they celebrated the Feast of Booths were doing it in an inadequate way. They read there in Leviticus 23 that they're supposed to build booths for themselves. They were celebrating the Feast of Ingathering, it's another name for it, that's one of the confusing things when you're reading about the feasts in the Old Testament, they have different names. The Feast of Booths, which I like to call the Feast of Tabernacles because I like the word "tabernacle" better than "booth." Booth seems just kind of pedestrian to me, but booth is probably a better description of what it was. You're making a little lean-to hut. So Feast of Booths, the English word. The Hebrew word for this feast is Sukkot, but it's also called in the Old Testament the Feast of Ingathering because this feast happened at the time when the grape harvest and the olive harvest had come in, in the fall. And so it was a celebration of all God's provision for the whole year at the end of the year, and what begins to be the beginning of the new year the way they celebrate it going forward as Jews.

So it's a time of great joy and so they read, as they're reading, you know, they've been overwhelmed with grief by the preaching of the word; the unveiling of the glory of God has made them come in-touch with themselves in such a painful way that they are mourning and wailing. They're told, "Don't wail. Don't mourn. Go home. Celebrate." They come back the next day, they read, they hear from the word some more and now they're told, "Hey, we need to celebrate the Feast of Booths." It's like finding out today, I can't really think of an example of this, we don't have a holiday coming up. Anyway, okay, say you were, this is going to be a stupid one but you're reading on December 1 and you read that... In your family archives, this is obviously one I did not plan to share, in your family archives you read the way that we're supposed to celebrate Christmas is we're supposed to get a tree and cut it from a certain place and decorate it with a certain type of thing, popcorn ring or something like that, and so this year we're going to return to that. But you read it on December 3, well, then you've got three weeks to make your popcorn

and get ready for it, right? Terrible analogy. But what's happening here is they realized that to celebrate Sukkot, to celebrate the Feast of Booths correctly, they need to actually live in a booth during the seven days, that God had told them that in Leviticus 23. And that it is supposed to be the greatest, most joyful feast of all of the feasts of God.

The Feast of Booths is the most joyful and so they are now committed to celebrating that feast, it's still three weeks away, two weeks away on the second day of the month because it starts on the 15th day of the month, and Nehemiah records for us their worship of God through that feast. And then after that feast of joy ends on the 22nd of the month, there's a day that lapses and then now chapter 9, verse 1, says, "Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them." What you see is their conviction was so deep that even that feast that they obeyed God to take part in, did not dull the sense of their overwhelming conviction of sin. Do you see that? It was long-lasting. It wasn't momentary conviction that quickly passed away. They were convicted in such a way that it was transformative. Even after three weeks now, the first day of the month, it's the 24th day of the month, it's been over three weeks since they heard that preaching service and were cut to the quick, but here they are now assembling, fasting, sackcloth, dirt upon them, symbolizing ultimate abasement, to make themselves of zero worth before God. And so what we see in this is the incredible power of the glory of God when it is made known. When God makes himself known, we come to know ourselves.

We see this in Isaiah. Turn to Isaiah 6. This is, of all the passages in the Old Testament, this is one of the most glorious, high water mark for the unveiling of God. To me, as I look at the Old Testament, I always think maybe these two are the top, Exodus 34 where the Lord puts Moses in the cleft of the rock and passes by in front of him proclaiming his name, and then this passage in Isaiah 6. Completely unexpected. Isaiah goes to the temple. He's not aware he has any problems. In fact, we know from the things we can discern from him in other writings, that he was of the priestly families. He was a man of God. He's going to the temple to perform his service and as we read in chapter 6, verse 1, "In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord." This is astonishing. Isaiah saw the Lord. And we're going to see he sees the Lord in somewhat the same way that Moses did, only the train of his robe, for no man can truly see the Lord and live. But he saw the train of God's robe.

Look what he says, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke." Isaiah suddenly unexpectedly has this vision of the glory of God. He's going to the temple as he always has, and at this moment the veil that separates the visible from the invisible is pulled back and he sees what is always there invisibly, imperceptible to men. He sees that. God opens his eyes and he sees the train of God's robe. Truly God is enthroned at Jerusalem, at the temple. He sees the train of his robe. He hears the Seraphim that he sees with his own eyes, six

wings he describes them. "Holy, holy, holy. The whole earth is full of the glory of the Lord."

And look at his response, verse 5, "Then I said, 'Woe is me.'" His first word is not to worship God, to join in with the Seraphim. Truly that's what we would want to be able to do, to join into the song of praise to God, "Holy, holy, holy," the antiphonal praise that is going on here. But Isaiah is stricken by his awareness of himself, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!," literally undone. I'm coming apart at the seams. He feels as if his soul is disintegrating in the presence of God. He's crying out in anguish and what is his anguish about? "Woe is me, for I am ruined!," I am undone, "Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Isaiah was not, I don't believe, confessing that he had a profanity problem, you know, saying bad swear words. He was confessing the fact that when he spoke about God and he would do that regularly as a priest, that he was completely misrepresenting God in his language, that he was so far from describing the greatness and grandeur and glory of God that his lips were filthy and vile, and he also saw his own sinfulness and unworthiness. "I have not been able to see You because I have been blinded by my sin." And he knew he was under judgment. And we read on in the passage and we find out God has mercy on him. God heals him with a coal from the altar, touches his tongue, and then Isaiah is now going to be the prophet of God, the voice of God to speak the words of God.

But you see the power of seeing God as he is. It reveals itself, when God reveals himself to us, he reveals us as well, something we see in John Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion." It opens with this amazing statement. The first thing he starts is theological writings on the glory of God. He says, "Without the knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." People sometimes misunderstand that and think you have to know yourself to know God. He really gets to it when he explains it more fully. He says you have to know God to know yourself, but that you can't know God without coming to know yourself. He uses really powerful, some words on page 38. He says this, he talks about the fact that we tend to look at ourselves and in comparison to others, we think we're doing pretty good. But when we see God, we suddenly, our standards are recalibrated instantly and profoundly.

Listen to what he says, "Because nothing appears," listen to this carefully, "Because nothing appears within or around us that has not been contaminated by great immorality." Do you get that? "Nothing is in us or around us that has not been contaminated by great immorality, what is a little less vile pleases us as a thing most pure." Did you get that? We are so messed up inside, so much immorality and evil, we swim in it like a fish that doesn't know he's wet, we swim in immorality and sinful filth and we look at someone who's a little more vile than us and we think we do well. We don't think it's them a little more vile than us. We think they're bad and, "Look at me." But when you come into the presence of God, suddenly you see your own vileness and you see that you're just a little less vile than the filthiest sinner. And in fact, the more you grow in grace, the more you tend to believe you are the filthiest of sinners.

But it's the unveiling of the glory of God that brings this. There is no knowledge of self without the knowledge of God, and so the law of God being preached, preaching through Leviticus? I've never preached Leviticus. In fact, I want to do that sometime. Ezra was preaching through Leviticus when the Spirit of God poured out his grace upon the people of God because even in those passages, what you have set on display is the holiness and grandeur and majesty of God.

The purpose of preaching is to unveil the glory of God. This is what is most relevant. You see, preaching is not about meeting felt needs. Nobody feels the need to see the greatness and glory of God. Unbelievers never feel that need, in fact, they want to avoid that. That's why Jesus said when he talks about the fact that men hate light, love darkness. What is light? Light is the revelation of the glory of God supremely made known in Jesus Christ himself. They hated him because they hated to see the glory and greatness of God. They hated to see that because they hated to see their own sin. And so it's never going to be a felt need for people, "Hey," an unbeliever say, "I just want to see God as He truly is because I want to see myself for the filthy wretch that I am." That's not going to be a felt need but it is a real need. It is the most profound need. It is really the only need. There is no other need compared to that. For us to be sinners bound for hell, hating God, running away from God, the one thing we need is to see God as he is, to see ourselves as we are, and to fall on our faces in repentance and cling to his Son who is able to make us clean.

So the word of God unveils the glory of God. John Piper in his book "The Supremacy of God in Preaching," the first line in the preface says this, "People are starving for the greatness of God," then he says, "only they don't know it." The reality is everyone is starving for the greatness of God. It doesn't mean they want it. Sometimes they're like, they are people who are like thirsty dying of thirst and they'd rather drink ocean water, saltwater, which will kill them faster than the living water of truth and the glory of God.

So the purpose of preaching is to unveil the glory of God, that is, to rightly teach the Scriptures is to put God on display, not man. We don't read the Scriptures to see, just to learn how to. We don't read the Scriptures to figure out how to lead like Nehemiah, or how to be courageous like David. That's not the main. There's sometimes application points that we can make there but the main thrust of every passage of Scripture needs to be the unveiling of the glory of God and that's what happened in Ezra's preaching of the law of God.

So the purpose of preaching, twofold purpose, first of all, to unveil the glory of God, secondly, the second part of that purpose is to transform the people of God. What we have here is a wholehearted transformation of the people in Nehemiah 9. Wholehearted transformation. It's really something to behold. I mean, we saw in chapter 9, verse 1, they come with fasting, sackcloth, dirt upon them. We're going to see them make a complete reorientation of their lives. Repentance means turning, going one way and turning and going another, and you see this happening in the people. Verse 2, they separated themselves from all foreigners. They're no longer intermarrying and for them to intermarry, it wasn't about race, it was about religion. You don't marry those who don't

love God, that's what he's saying. That's what it was always about in the Old Testament and that's what it's about for Christians today. You are only to marry other people who love Jesus if you love Jesus. Don't be unequally yoked with someone who doesn't love Jesus.

So what's happening here is the people are realizing they have been sinning in their relationships with unbelievers. They've been yoking themselves with unbelievers and they must change and they're radically reorienting the direction of their lives but it's a wholehearted transformation. I want you to look at this with me. I mentioned that it's been three weeks since they were first convicted of their sin and you see in this, though, a real picture of what real repentance looks like. Genuine repentance is evidenced by a whole person change, a redirection of the whole self. It's not just merely intellectual. It's not even merely just a change of behavior that could be temporary, but it is a change of the whole person and you see this beautifully demonstrated here.

First of all, we talked about the emotional response, the affections are engaged, the heart. To think about the heart biblically, the heart is different in Scripture than it is in English and we kind of wrestle with this because we tend to think of the heart just merely as like the affections, the emotions. Biblically, the heart is the emotions and the affections but it's also the thinking, the beliefs. The intellectual working of the mind is part of the heart. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

So the thinking and the affections and the will are all a function of the heart. When God talks about the heart in Scripture, he's talking about all three of these components. What you see is wholehearted, biblically wholehearted transformation. You see, first of all, what we see initially or the most obvious thing is the capturing of the affections of the people through the preaching of the word. So the preaching of God produces transformation through this wholehearted repentance and it's evident, first of all, in the affections. Remember, the mind, the affections, the will, three parts of the heart biblically.

The affections. The affections, as we saw in verses 9 to 12 of chapter 8, are completely engaged. They're mourning. They're weeping. They're wailing literally. They're overwhelmed with guilt. And here in chapter 9, verse 1, three weeks later they're still overwhelmed with guilt. They know now is the time for fasting. We've finished the time of rejoicing, it's time for us to get back to business. We must do business with God. He has convicted us. We must seek forgiveness. And so fasting, sackcloth, and dirt.

True biblical Christianity engages the affections. There is a tendency for some people to be, some of us and many of us tend to this probably, to be too intellectual. Now that's not really rightly said. Merely intellectual, because we're going to see the intellect is a part of it, an essential part of it, but it's not merely intellectual. The truth of God is not merely mental. It is that but it engages the affections. It engages the heart.

James read earlier from Proverbs 5. There is some vivid imagery in Proverbs 5. In fact, as you read your Bible, look for the imagery. The Bible is a book without pictures and it's

supposed to be without pictures. I think it's better without pictures. I'm not saying if you've got a children's Bible you need to throw it in the trash. I'm not saying that at all, but I'm saying that as we grow and mature in faith, we don't need pictures. The Bible has the pictures in them, they're just not, they're word pictures that engage the imagination of the reader. It's sort of like if you make pictures you won't do them justice. You won't do the word pictures justice.

But the Bible is replete with imagery like, "The lips of an adulteress drip honey, but smoother than oil is her speech, but in the end she's bitter as wormwood, sharper than a two-edged sword." Think about the imagery. The lips of an adulteress drip honey, smoother than oil is her speech. It's sweet to the taste. It's soothing to the heart. It feels like oil which is used medicinally. Imagine for a sore throat, you take oil. You will feel better if you do this. You need this. This is what adultery looks like. Do you see how clear God is? He engages the affections even as you're reading that, think about that. It seems to be that. It promises the delight of your soul. It promises the soothing of your soul, drips honey, smoother than oil, but in the end she's not sweet, she is bitter as wormwood. The idea of wormwood is something that's so vile that you put it in your mouth, you want to immediately get it out. It's not like you ate something bad that, you know, some dish that you really don't care for. No, this is something so utterly offensive that you want to eject it from your mouth and you don't care who's around, you're spitting it out. It's that vile. The problem is you can't get it out. The taste is lingering. It's overwhelming. He says you thought it was honey but in reality what appeared to be honey, what Satan packages as honey, what the world says is honey is really wormwood. What the world says will soothe a sore throat, your soul and your ache of the pain that you have in your life, that it will be like medicine for you if you partake of sexual sin, and in reality imagine thinking you're pouring oil down your throat and you're putting down your throat a two-edged sword. That is reality. God says, "Engage your affections around My word. Hate sin because I hate it. Hate sin because you ought to hate it."

So the word of God engages the affections and when God's glory is made known, the heart is engaged, the emotions are engaged, the affections are engaged. But not only that, the will is fully engaged in this revival that we see here. At the end, well, they're going to spend, they're going to confess their sins and the iniquities of their fathers from verse 2 all the way to the end of the chapter, and then at the end of the chapter, verse 38, they're going to make a covenant renewal in writing with God. Look at verse 38, chapter 9, verse 38, Nehemiah 9. "Now because of all this We are making an agreement in writing; And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests." Then you have in chapter 10 all the names listed and the terms of the covenant renewal.

So they've been moved but they haven't been moved merely in their affections, true repentance results in the will changing. Action. So the will is engaged, the affections are engaged. This is what true repentance looks like. This is what true transformation of the soul looks like. This is what needs to happen every time we hear the word of God. This is what we need to pray for. It won't happen like this, certainly. It will rarely happen like this. It may only happen like this once in our life or never in our life. We may just be not

going to experience this kind of thing that they did. This is like the Great Awakening. It doesn't happen every week, every year, every century but yet the principle is still there.

The word of God does do this, it unveils the glory of God and it transforms the people of God by transforming the individual souls of individual Christians. It engages the affections of the heart to see God and to see yourself, to hate your sin, to see how much farther we are from where we should be than we even thought. And in that misery, we begin to hate sin. You see this pictured in the Beatitudes. Jesus said, "This is the pattern of salvation." Remember Matthew 5 when he gives the Beatitudes? He gives a picture of what salvation looks like. Where does salvation begin? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled." You see, all at the beginning is all about conviction. Poverty of spirit, that's the absolute destitution of the soul. When you realize that you are absolutely destitute before God, naked before him, nothing to bring into his presence except filth, in that moment Jesus says, "O how happy are you," that's what "blessed" could be translated. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. O how happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. O how happy are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

So the soul is engaged, the will is engaged, but we need to be clear the mind, the soul and the will don't get engaged without the mind. So don't listen to mystical nonsense. You need the word. You need the word explained. You need the word yourself studied, meditated on. This is how God transforms. This is how God engages the affections. This is how God transforms the will. When you look back at chapter 8, they didn't just have an emotional experience because they got together and sang a lot of songs, and they got the music really amped up and they had some cool smoke machine. No, they were sitting there out in the early morning of Jerusalem hearing the word read and preached.

That's what worship is, in fact, that's the essence of worship. This is one of the problems we have, the way we use words. Worship is not what happens in the first part of the service and then before the preaching. Worship is the whole thing and the preaching is actually, if anybody should have the title of worship leader in a Christian service, it is the preacher. He's the one who's leading the worship because what is worship? Worship is reflecting back to God the radiance of his worth. That means you see the radiance of his worth and you praise him for what you see. Where do you see that? In the preaching of the Bible. So we're worshipping the whole time. We're all worship leaders but worship is the whole service.

So this is what we see demonstrated here. They hear preaching. Look at this, and the mind must be engaged for the affections. God goes through the mind to the affections and the will. He never bypasses the mind. That's very important and you just read your Bible and you will see this. Just look here back at chapter 8. They are going to read the book, verse 2. He brought the book of the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding. He read. He read the book. Verse 3, in the presence of

men and women, those who could understand and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. They're listening. Verse 8, they read from the book of the law of God translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. Something is happening in the mind. They are understanding. They are gaining understanding of what the word of God says. It's being explained to them. They're thinking about it. They're pondering it. And as they reason through the Scriptures, their souls are captured and their will is brought into submission to God in a glorious saving work of the Lord.

So we should want to see God every time we come to worship. We should say like the Greeks said to the disciples, "Sirs, we would see Jesus." Lord, let us see Jesus today. Let us see you and your glory, you and your goodness. Lift my eyes from all the things that distract me and let me see how wonderful you are because we live in a world that believes God is not good, and they lie every day because they're all deceived. And we need to see him as he is, and when we see him as he is, we find we will see ourselves as we are and there's going to be necessary pain. But the beauty of it is, it results in the sorrow that comes is swallowed up by joy.

You see this, I mentioned repentance is what's happening here and you see a really neat thing, an example of this in 2 Corinthians 7 where Paul talks about worldly sorrow versus godly sorrow. Paul is saying, listen, in his ministry to the Corinthians, he had had to say a lot of hard words and say a lot of things they did not want to hear, and in saying those things that they did not want to hear, he had produced sorrow in them. But he's encouraging them in chapter 7 that there's a kind of sorrow that is worldly sorrow that just is concerned with, you know, the consequences of sin, so to speak, earthly consequences. My life is messed up. I'm embarrassed. I feel dirty in the eyes of people. That's worldly sorrow. Godly sorrow is to see ourselves before God in such a way that nothing else really matters compared to that. Like David said in Psalm 51:4, "Against thee and thee only have I sinned." He had sinned against a lot of people but relatively speaking, his sin against God was so vivid and clear that it was as if he had not sinned against anyone else in comparison to the great offense against God. So this, Paul says this godly sorrow has produced in you this great zeal. He talks about it and he says, "It's produced a zeal that has led you to turn away from sin. "I am glad that I made you sorry because now you have the joy of walking with God."

So we need to be people who expect to be made sorry when we come to hear the word of God because we need it. I need it and you need it. We need to see our sinfulness and it's going to be painful. The word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword. That is not anything but pain right there, isn't it? It's a two-edged sword that pierces to dividing joint and marrow, soul and spirit, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart. It lays us bare before the God with whom we have to do. So when we put ourselves under the word of God, if God's Spirit is working, we will be laid bare, we will be convicted, we will experience pain and sorrow, but we need to pray for God's grace that our sorrow will be godly sorrow that produces true repentance, and when that's the case, it results in joy.

So I want to just remind you of something we saw. You know, this whole thing about the Feast of Booths and the way the chapter unfolds is really striking. They're reading their Bible in verse 13 on the second day of the seventh month, the month of Tishri in Hebrew, and they see that when they celebrate on the 15th day of the month, 13 days later, when we celebrate the Feast of Booths, we've got to do it differently, and so get the word out. Nobody has ever done this in hundreds, a thousand years basically, nobody's done it right. We've got to do it right. And so they have those booths and they live in those booths and they're supposed to celebrate the whole time.

It's interesting, the text does not even mention the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement is the 10th day of the seventh month. That's Yom Kippur. Now did they celebrate Yom Kippur? I am confident they did. In fact, I know they did because when they found the passage that told them they were supposed to use leafy branches to make booths, in Leviticus 23 that passage comes right after telling them to celebrate the Day of Atonement. And they had already been celebrating the Feast of Booths and the Day of Atonement every year faithfully but the text doesn't bother to tell us about Yom Kippur because God wants us to get caught up in what they were, caught up in joy because Yom Kippur is a solemn day. And so it happened and every Jew reading this knew it happened, didn't need to be reminded that it happened and since they celebrated Yom Kippur, they know how the first ten days of the seventh month are usually serious and somber preparations for the Day of Atonement, the 10th day, and then five days later it's time for joy.

But in this passage when they are being brought back from being so far away from God into the presence of God, overwhelmed with grief, the Lord knows they can't bear the full weight of that. "Go home. Stop being sad now. You can't be sad for the next 10 days until Yom Kippur. Go home and celebrate because you've come back to Me." So that the force of the chapter is to say even though God slays us with his word, we can say like Job, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." Because there's nothing more joyful than to be slain by the word of God and then made to cast yourself on the Son of God. Jesus is able to cover every sin. Whatever he exposes, he will heal. Whatever he reveals, he will cover. That's the glory of the gospel and so that the whole chapter has this note, the eighth chapter has this note of joy because when God convicts, he restores. Sorrow will last for the night but joy comes in the morning.

And that verse "the joy of the Lord is your strength," that's the one place in the Bible it occurs, Nehemiah 8:10, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." So when you are convicted and feeling overwhelmed by the weight of your sin under the presence of God, there's a sense in which even in that moment when you feel overwhelmed, let the joy of the Lord be your strength. The God who is convicting you is only doing it to heal you if you will submit to him. If you will not submit to him, then you should be afraid. But there's no reason not to run to Christ. He says, "Whosoever will, come, drink from the water of life." Our God is a God of goodness and mercy who abounds in lovingkindness.

So the purpose of the word is to unveil the glory of God, to transform the people of God all for the joy of his people and the glory of his Son.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your word, it is that which exposes our great need, convicts us, it tears down and uproots, tears down wrong ways of thinking and believing, it demolishes ungodly affections, the love of the world, the love of the flesh, the lust of the flesh, the pride of life. Your word smashes it, exposes it, so it's painful but Your word also that tears down and uproots also plants and builds, it restores, it edifies. It makes us truly what You made us to be. It restores our humanity. It gives us joy. It makes us know the wonder of walking in Your truth so that we can then say with the Psalmist, "O how I love Your law! It is my delight." To walk in Your ways, Lord, by the power of Your Spirit, by the power of Christ's victory, Him living in us as His people, You make us able to walk in holiness and we are the happiest of all people when we are in Your presence. Lord, continue to work Your will in the hearts of everyone here today. Help those who need to repent and place their faith in Christ to do so without delay. Give them grace to truly believe that Jesus saves whoever comes to Him. He will not turn them away. And Lord, be glorified in the joy of Your people. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.