

The Life Giving Power of Scripture

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Turn with me in your Bibles to the ninth chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 9. We come this morning again, we finished Nehemiah 8 and 9, these three chapters 8, 9 and 10 really are something of a unit because in these three chapters what we see is an extraordinary movement in the history of God's people; one of the mightiest movements of God recorded in Scripture is recorded here in these pages. It's really not an exaggeration to say this is a great awakening. It's really an example of a true spiritual awakening for the people of God. Revival in the true sense of the word. The word "revival" is often used, more a reflection of something maybe a few decades back that it was very popular to have revival meetings. The intention was good but maybe the language wasn't best. Revival is actually the return of the life of God to the people of God and the revivification. That's what the word "vivification," it means "to be alive." And so to revive is to restore life and so revival is the return of the life of God to the people of God and that's a sovereign work. That's why you can't really have a revival meeting and just declare you're going to have a revival. God declares the revival, but it's appropriate to want that and we have in these pages of the Old Testament nothing less than that kind of sovereign work of God in the lives of his people. You have a radical recovery of life. You have a sense in which they begin to experience life and life more abundantly. Abundant life.

And in all of this, what you see is that this change, this renewal, this restoration, this recovery of life happens through the word of God. In fact, the title of the message this morning is "The Life Giving Power of Scripture." The life giving power of Scripture. We need to believe the Bible's ability. We just sang songs about the sufficiency of Scripture and the Bible itself makes these claims. As we read in 1 Peter 1 earlier, that it is that which produces life. It's how you're born again. New life comes through, not through perishable seed but through imperishable seed, that is, the preaching of the word of God, that is, the explanation, the understanding of the word of God, the proclamation of the word of God, the reading of the word of God. That produces life. We're prone to be dull, senseless, go through the motions, have an orthodox view of the power of Scripture and yet not really truly in our hearts believe it or act on it, and this passage is given to us to call us to understand the life giving power of Scripture.

When revival happens, when true spiritual awakening happens, what we see is there is a renewed view of God himself. There is a new clarity that comes with this spiritual life, this revival of what it really means to be human, what it really means to be alive. It's to see God and it brings everything into perspective. It's almost like it flips everything right side up. I remember reading sometime about a medical condition, I can't remember the name of it, but where you see the world and something has happened in the brain and you see everything upside down. So imagine how difficult that would be and then to have the power to have it flipped back around, what a profound blessing. There's a sense in which spiritually we tend to, unbelievers come into the world in the dark and then believers still once we come to faith and really come to experience the life of God, we still struggle with having it get out of kilter so badly that it's like we're looking at the world upside down and the word of God has the power to flip things around, to radically alter our perspective.

So we see in this passage one of the most beautiful examples of corporate revival in all of Scripture, in all of history. And what we're going to see as we look at this, and we're going to be unpacking this for a few Sundays, Lord willing, and we see that what God's word does is it produces repentance. This is also a beautiful expression, one of the most beautiful examples of repentance in all of the word of God as well and it's corporate repentance. Repentance means to turn, to change, and what you have is the return of the life of God to the people of God and then the turning of the people of God to God in response. So a turning away from sin and a turning to God, that's really what repentance is. The Hebrew word means "to turn; to return." You're going in one direction and you turn and go the other direction. And this is a wonderful example of this.

It starts with Ezra's preaching. It starts with the people of God putting themselves under the word of God and then responding rightly to the word of God, and then through the word of God experiencing a radical new reorientation to their lives because what we're going to see is these are people in really really difficult circumstances. These are people whose lives are not enviable, that we would not want to change places with them if we could, I mean, from the human vantage point of looking at their lives. Very difficult circumstances and yet in the midst of this, they recover the life of God through the word of God, and they recover a right perspective on their circumstances so that if they could say to us would they want to trade places with us, they'd say no. In fact, when you really think of it biblically, you wouldn't want to trade places with anybody else because you know God has done what is good and right and perfect for you. When you're thinking like that, you know God's flipped it back around and you're seeing it as it is. When we're thinking we wish we were somewhere else, "I was born in the wrong time. My circumstances are unfair. God has been unkind to me." When you're thinking like that, you're looking at the world, at best, upside down, but the word of God can reorient, can refocus, can redirect, can revive and show you that God is on the throne and that he is good and we see this in this passage, one of the most beautiful examples of revival, repentance and restoration, the restoration of life in all of Scripture. The life giving power of Scripture.

We're going to read the ninth chapter. I mentioned it's really 8, 9 and 10 kind of go together because chapter 8 is the preaching that produces what we're going to see in chapter 9 which is this expression of repentance. And then chapter 10 is the carrying forth of the active application of this repentance. There's a corporate renewal, a covenant renewal ceremony in chapter 10. And so the word of God produces repentance and covenant renewal and it's one package, 8, 9 and 10 of Nehemiah.

Now let's look at this ninth chapter now and this is particularly focused on the repentance of the people of God, corporate confession, this time of worship. Nehemiah 9:1,

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. 2 The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. 4 Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. 5 Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed And exalted above all blessing and praise! 6 "You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, The heaven of heavens with all their host, The earth and all that is on it, The seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them And the heavenly host bows down before You. 7 You are the LORD God, Who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, And gave him the name Abraham. 8 You found his heart faithful before You, And made a covenant with him To give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite To give it to his descendants. And You have fulfilled Your promise, For You are righteous. 9 You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, And heard their cry by the Red Sea. 10 Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, Against all his servants and all the people of his land; For You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them, And made a name for Yourself as it is this day. 11 You divided the sea before them, So they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground; And their pursuers You hurled into the depths, Like a stone into raging waters. 12 And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, And with a pillar of fire by night To light for them the way In which they were to go. 13 Then You came down on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. 14 So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, Through Your servant Moses. 15 You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger, You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst, And You told them to enter in

order to possess The land which You swore to give them. 16 But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments. 17 They refused to listen, And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; And You did not forsake them. 18 Even when they made for themselves A calf of molten metal And said, 'This is your God Who brought you up from Egypt,' And committed great blasphemies, 19 You, in Your great compassion, Did not forsake them in the wilderness; The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day, To guide them on their way, Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they were to go. 20 You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, And You gave them water for their thirst. 21 Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness and they were not in want; Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell. 22 You also gave them kingdoms and peoples, And allotted them to them as a boundary. They took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon And the land of Og the king of Bashan. 23 You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven, And You brought them into the land Which You had told their fathers to enter and possess. 24 So their sons entered and possessed the land. And You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, And You gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, To do with them as they desired. 25 They captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing, Hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, Fruit trees in abundance. So they ate, were filled and grew fat, And reveled in Your great goodness. 26 But they became disobedient and rebelled against You, And cast Your law behind their backs And killed Your prophets who had admonished them So that they might return to You, And they committed great blasphemies. 27 Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them, But when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors. 28 But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You; Therefore You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven, And many times You rescued them according to Your compassion, 29 And admonished them in order to turn them back to Your law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances, By which if a man observes them he shall live. And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen. 30 However, You bore with them for many years, And admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, Yet they would not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. 31

Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, For You are a gracious and compassionate God. 32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and lovingkindness, Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You, Which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people, From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day. 33 However, You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly. 34 For our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers have not kept Your law Or paid attention to Your commandments and Your admonitions with which You have admonished them. 35 But they, in their own kingdom, With Your great goodness which You gave them, With the broad and rich land which You set before them, Did not serve You or turn from their evil deeds. 36 Behold, we are slaves today, And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it. 37 Its abundant produce is for the kings Whom You have set over us because of our sins; They also rule over our bodies And over our cattle as they please, So we are in great distress. 38 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."

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father God, we come to You to praise and honor You because You alone are the Lord. There is none like You. You have created all that is. You sustain every living thing on earth and in heaven. We come to You because You are a God that, as we just read in this passage, are gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. We marvel at Your patience with the people of Israel, and we marvel at Your patience with us. We come asking that You would speak to us by Your Spirit, through Your word, that You would admonish us and that You would give us ears to hear and hearts to obey and hearts to love the One who makes us new, the Lord Jesus. We pray this in His name. Amen.

The life giving power of Scripture. This prayer that the people of God prayed, the Levites leading them in this prayer, is a picture of people who have been radically changed by the power of Scripture. They are people who, though their circumstances are not great even then, they suddenly have had things flipped around and they now see things as they are and that begins with seeing God as he is.

You saw that as we read the passage, they go back and forth between the beauty of God, his character, who he is, there are many statements of his attributes. "You alone are God. You created. You are just. You are righteous. You keep Your promises. You make covenant. You are gracious and compassionate." The word "compassionate" five or six different times, "You are a compassionate God." And it goes back and forth between God's faithfulness and compassion and the sinfulness and wickedness of his people.

You heard "You. You. You." The second person. God. Speaking of God. Eighty-five times in English the second person pronouns "You, Your" are used describing God. And then you also hear the third person pronoun, "they, them, their," speaking of the fathers. And then you hear "we, us, our," the identifying of the people of God in the present with the people of God in the past. They, their, them you hear over and over again. In contrast you have God's glory and beauty and goodness and you have the failure and wickedness of his people and this is the gift of God's grace and the gift of the power of his word to restore their understanding of who they are before God.

So what I want to do as we look at this, this morning, I want to consider this under three points and we're really kind of doing an overview of the chapter. We're going to try to dig in a little more detail after this but when you look at what's really happening in this chapter, we have, as I said, it's the return of the life of God to the people of God. It's the life giving power of Scripture. It's all happened by the power of the word. But I want us to look, first of all, at the first point this morning: a realistic appraisal of your circumstances. I want to apply this to us but what we see with the people of God here is they had a realistic appraisal of their circumstances. The word of God does not produce a Pollyanna type of existence where you pretend things are better than they are. The word of God produces a real view of what is really true and so the people have that sense as well, that the circumstances they're in, they see them accurately.

I want to show you this. They have a realistic appraisal of their circumstances. Their circumstances are dismal. You see it at the end of the prayer in verse 32, is the first place where you see this and the key word in verse 32 is the word "hardship." When he says, "Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and lovingkindness, Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You." Now here he's actually describing the history of the people leading up into the present and all of this hardship that has been a part of the experience of the people of God throughout history. The people now are praying, "Lord, don't let these hardships seem small to You." But they're acknowledging our history is a history of hardship. It's self-inflicted, yes, but nevertheless it's still hardship.

Then in verse 36, this realistic appraisal of their circumstances is seen when they say, "Behold, we are slaves." Verse 36, "Behold, we are slaves today." And they say it twice. And behold, the word "behold" in Hebrew, we don't use this in English. It's one of the things I like about the New American Standard, it does translate it because I think we need that translation. It's an interjection that basically calls attention to it. It underscores and highlights what's about to be said. It's as if saying, "Look, we are slaves today." Verse 36, "as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it."

So twice he repeats this assessment, "We are slaves," acknowledging the realistic appraisal of the people of God in this moment. Their circumstances are not good. In fact, it's very different than what they expected. It's very different than what Israel expected when they returned from captivity. Based on the promises of God in Jeremiah, Isaiah, the other prophets, the pre-exilic prophets who prophesied to them and said you need to

repent and return, if you don't, you're going to be taken into captivity, but after you're taken into captivity, God will bring about restoration. And what happened was in those promises you had an initial fulfillment in the actual return of the people from Babylon, because what happens is they sin, they sin, they sin and they are sent off into Babylon and then after 70 years they're brought back. And the books of Ezra/Nehemiah, which we've been looking at, those of you that have just joined us today, we've been looking at Ezra and Nehemiah as one book, in the Hebrew Bible it is one book, and so when you look at Ezra/Nehemiah as one book, you see that basically the book is about the return from the captivity to Jerusalem. The people of God have been carried off captive by Nebuchadnezzar between 605 and 586 BC in three installments. Interesting, they're carried off in three installments, 605, 597, 586. 605, Daniel and his friends and a bunch of other people are carried off. 597, Ezekiel and a bunch of other people are carried off. 586, the king and a bunch of other people are taken off. It starts in 605-606. They're back in the land, restored to the land, rebuilding the foundation of the temple in 536, 70 years later. And so God says, "I'm going to send you captive," but then he gives these promises, "but I'm going to bring you back." And the people in looking at those promises expected a return to the former glory. They thought when they came back to the land, that it would be something like it had been under David and Solomon, that Israel would again be a glorious nation, worshiping God again as they had in the past. But in reality this return, the prophecies are going to be, because God is faithful to his word and they are even testifying it here, God does what he promises but they're learning that the promises of God that he's described about the return are really about something far greater than just becoming the nation they were. They're about Christ and an entirely new kingdom, the kingdom of God, the spiritual kingdom of God coming to the world.

So they're learning over time that their expectations are meeting a reality that's different. Their country, Judea, is actually a little tiny province of Persia. It's not a free country. They're under Persian hegemony. The Persians are reigning over them and Judea is a tiny postage stamp of what it had been before. Their circumstances, they're surrounded by enemies. In fact, if you put this in context, you think back to Nehemiah 1 when Nehemiah got word about the circumstances in Jerusalem, this is 90 years after the first return. The first return happens, it ends between 538 and 536. They get to the land and they start, they rebuild the altar 536 BC. Nehemiah hears about what's going on in Jerusalem in 445, almost 91 years later, and then he brings about this third return to come back and rebuild the wall and that's what we've been hearing.

In those very just few months, they rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and now they're meeting together for this time of reading the word and this revival breaks out, but in reality their physical circumstances, their physical circumstances are bleak. They're dismal. The word "great distress" in verse 37, I said the circumstances are mentioned in these last verses of the prayer. One of the marks, really, of the work of God in this situation is that they don't lead with their circumstances. Think about how you pray and how I pray. When you're in pain, when you're in difficulty, what's the first thing you talk to God about? Your pain. Your difficulty. Your misery. But when God really is working in us, what happens is it's not primarily about us, it's primarily about him. He's catching us up into something bigger. We see things in a different way because he gives us eyes to

see and ears to hear. And so they start off with who God is and their own sin, and that helps them actually put into perspective their difficult circumstances.

But when Nehemiah found out about what was going on in Jerusalem, remember he's working for the cupbearer in Persia and he gets a report in chapter 1 from his brother and some friends who've come back from Jerusalem. They went on a visit to Jerusalem. They've come back to the capital of Persia where Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king. They tell him about it and Nehemiah when he hears about the state of Jerusalem, that the gates have been destroyed with fire, the wall is broken down, the enemies of God triumphing over the people, the worship of God is not fully restored, his heart is grieved and he mourns and fasts over the condition of the city. Then in chapter 2, he goes and he surveys the city and after he looks at the city, he says to them in chapter 2, verse 17, "What great distress, what great reproach we are in." In chapter 4, as they begin to start to rebuild the walls, they are surrounded by enemies, they have enemies who hate God and who hate what they're doing and who are actively opposing it. It's not an easy work. It's a hard work. The situation is terrible. It's bleak. Sanballat the Samaritan, Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshum the Arab, the Ashdodites. So they're really surrounded on all sides. They have the Samaritans to the north that are actively opposing their work. They have the Ammonites to the east who are actively opposing the work, led by Tobiah. They have the Arabs to the south, and the Ashdodites to the west. They are surrounded by enemies on this little postage stamp of a place and they're trying to rebuild the wall and what they're rebuilding appears to them as nothing. So their circumstances are bleak and their future is even bleaker still.

How do you deal with circumstances like that? Do you feel like when you assess your life, your realistic appraisal of your life, your circumstances is bleak a word that would describe them? Are you discouraged? Do you feel the kind of distress that they felt? This word "great distress" in verse 37, it's a word loaded with emotion. It actually, the root idea is to be narrow and confined, to be like pressed in, you can't move and you're being pressed in, and the word connotes the strongest emotional response to being pressed by external circumstances and forces. So it's intense emotional response of this anguish of being pressed in and so you feel like your life is pressing in on you. That's what they said. So we are in, it doesn't just say we are in distress, that's what that word means, pressed in, overwhelmed, but we are in great distress.

So they see their circumstances with clarity. Do you feel something of that in your life right now? If not, you may soon. This is what it is to live in a fallen world. So do a realistic appraisal of your circumstances, you look at your future and what you see does not seem promising, does not seem good. You wish you could escape. You feel like you're bound up and not able to be free. If that's your circumstance, this passage is directly for you. And if that's not your circumstance, it's still for you because that will be your circumstance at some point if you live long enough, and likely more than once.

So a realistic appraisal of your circumstance. The second point this morning is: a revolutionary perspective on your circumstances. A revolutionary perspective on your circumstances. I mentioned they don't lead with their problems, they don't lead with their

pain. You would think they would have started off by saying, "We are in great distress," where the prayer would have started off that way. "Lord, we praise You. Yes, we give You praise." Kind of initial lip service when the first thing they needed to say, you know, "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done. We are in great distress! We are in pain! We are slaves! Help us!" But that's not how they pray. Their circumstances that are very real, there's no Pollyanna kind of prettying up or cosmetic application to try to improve the view of the circumstances, the circumstances are appraised accurately but the circumstances appraised accurately are actually now viewed truly accurately in perspective because you can only make sense of your circumstances in light of the overarching plan of God, and if you aren't looking at your circumstances in light of the plan of God, you are in danger of just being, multiplying your misery and missing the opportunity to glorify God in your life.

Their circumstances are caught up into the larger plan of God because, and this is what the word of God does. You see, you can't do this on your own. It's the word of God that has done this. That's what's happened. It is the word of God. Remember, we read just in this passage that they spent a quarter of the day in verse 3, chapter 9, "While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God." Twelve hour day, three hours of hearing the preaching of the word, three hours of confession and worship in response. Six hour service. Boy, I just keep thinking we're just lightweights, aren't we?

But you think about what's gone into this and look back at chapter 8 for a moment because it all started with that preaching service on the first day of the month. This is the 24th day, verse 1, chapter 9, the 24th day of this month, that is, the seventh month, that we started looking at in chapter 8, because on the first day of the seventh month, verse 2, "Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday," probably four hours. And we find out it's described what the reading was. It wasn't merely just the reading of the Bible, verse 8 tells us this, describes what that reading looked like. "They read from the book, from the law of God," this is chapter 8, verse 8, "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading." So they're reading it and they're explaining it. That's expositional preaching. They are experiencing expository preaching. That's why in the last couple of weeks we looked at the supremacy of preaching in the life of the church. This was a watershed moment in the history of God's people where now preaching becomes the central nourishing reality for the people of God.

So this revolutionary new perspective comes through the preaching of the word. So they heard it on the first day for four hours, then in verse 13 of chapter 8, "on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. They found written in the law." They are reading and preaching the Bible on the second day of the seventh month. And then they find there in the reading that they're supposed to

celebrate the Feast of Booths in a slightly different way than they've ever celebrated it because they're reading the Bible, they're reading Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Those five books sparked this incredible revival of God. Isn't that amazing? And it's Leviticus particularly that they're reading, chapter 23, when they find out, "We've been doing this wrong on the Feast of Booths." And so they make an adjustment and the Feast of Booths in God's providence, they're reading the Bible on the first day of the seventh month, the second day of the seventh month. Well, the Feast of Booths is scheduled for the seventh month every year, the 15th day of the seventh month. So now they have time, 13 days to get ready to celebrate it correctly and so they send out proclamation to everyone all over the land now and say, "This is how we're going to worship God. We're going to do it, that whole seven days you're going to live in your tents. We're going to camp out for a week." That's what they did. That was a part of the Feast of Booths."

So as they do that, they have great joy. They're supposed to celebrate it with joy. It's the most joyful feast of all and the word of God has shown them this. Even though, remember what happened when they read the word in chapter 8, when they read the word they were so convicted by the word that they were wailing. That first day when they had the four hour preaching service, they were wailing in agony under conviction of sin. The text is expressive. They were actually, they weren't just crying, they were weeping and it was so loud that the priests and Levites said, "Be quiet! Silence! This is not a day of mourning, it's a day of joy." God in his wisdom wanted them to associate revival not with misery but with joy. It's first of all joy because in the end it's all joy. To be restored, to have the life of God restored to the soul of man is the most joyful blessed thing that could ever happen to a human being. It is to be truly alive. You and I were made in the image of God to see the glory of God, to behold his glory, and to delight in his glory. We were made to need that. That is the one thing that satisfies. That's why the Psalmist says in Psalm 27:4, David says, "One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD And to inquire in His temple." Psalm 73, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." That is the heart of a human being that has been tuned to see what we were made for in the beginning. You were made to see God as he is, to love him as he is, to worship him as he is, and in that you find your supreme dignity, your supreme humanity.

This is why the message of the gospel, though it's offensive to people, it is the most loving urgent thing that even the most hateful opponent of the gospel needs more than anything. They need life. They need Christ. They need to be made from being a hater of God to being a worshiper of God, then they will find their joy that they're longing for. And this is what has happened to the people. They have a revolutionary perspective on their circumstances. The word of God has changed them. So they've heard the preaching on the first day of the month, they heard the preaching on the second day of the month. In verse 18, this is how the power of the word of God does this, verse 18 of chapter 8 now. We're still working through and looking at how it's the word that is doing this. Can't miss that. Verse 18. This is during the Feast of Booths. It's talking about Ezra, "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." From the 15th day to the 22nd day of the month they are gathering for preaching every day, reading and preaching of the word.

Now think about that. The power of the word, like a sledgehammer pounding on their hard hearts, pounding and pounding and pounding and pounding, and then freedom. That's what's happening here. The power of the word of God to till up the heart and then to renew the heart, to restore the heart, to revive the heart. Like Psalm 19:7 says, "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul." There's nothing wrong with the law of God. There's no deficiency. That's what "perfect" means. There's nothing wrong. There's no blemish in the word of God. It's exactly perfectly what we need. And when you hear the law of the Lord and when you hear it and you hear it, what it does is it restores the soul. Literally the word there is "repent." It returns the soul. It returns the soul to what the soul was meant to be. It restores you to what you were meant to be.

It's the law of the Lord. Again the law. It's so surprising, isn't it, I mean, it's like if you start, when I came to this church, I did not start preaching Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. I'm not saying you necessarily should, either. You know, there are other, we have a full 66 books we can preach from. But what I'm saying is, isn't that amazing, and it tells me I need to get back into the word. I've only preached through Genesis as a pastor. I'm thinking more about these other books because it brought a revival and every passage of Scripture has that power. But what we see here is it was that pounding of the word the first day of the month, the second day of the month, the 15th through the 22nd day of the month. Then on the 24th day of the month, another three hour service of the preaching produces this kind of spiritual renewal, this kind of revival.

So you look at just the indications of where they are, the clarity with which they see God. I mentioned there are so many statements. They see God's attributes and his acts. That's really the main thing that comes through their prayer. God's attributes, that's his qualities of his character, and his actions that show and demonstrate who he is and what he's like. In verse 6, "You alone are the LORD." Attribute, I mean, he's the Creator. Verse 8, "You are righteous. You fulfilled Your promise for You are righteous." Verse 17 after he talks about the refusal to listen, the people didn't remember, "they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt." Isn't that astonishing? They did that after God delivered them from slavery with the 10 plagues. After God delivered them through the Red Sea, they appointed a leader and wanted to go back into slavery. And yet look at how God responds, "But You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." Verse 19, "You, in Your great compassion, Did not forsake them." Do you see that, the compassion over and over again. Verse 25, they "reveled in Your great goodness," the last sentence in verse 25. He's talking about they got into the land. They captured fortified cities. They had houses full of everything. They went into the land, God gave them a land that had everything they needed. They didn't have to plant any vineyards. They didn't have to plant the gardens, they just went in and harvested the gardens. How good of the Lord to do it that

way, and they enjoyed all of that and reveled in his great goodness. The important thing is look at God, his great goodness.

Verse 27 after they were delivered into the hands of oppressors because they again forgot the Lord, verse 27, "when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers." This is the period of the judges. They would depart from the Lord and God in his kindness would discipline them by letting them, as they're running away from God, he's so good to give them oppression so that they don't just continue running away from God and have their lives go well. Think about this now. If they run away from God and their lives go well and everything's going great for them in Israel and they die and wake up in hell, but the Lord in his great lovingkindness even puts oppressors there that weigh them down and their lives are so miserable that they look up and they cry out and God continues to hear their cry. He may be doing that in your life. Maybe you could say like the people in Nehemiah's day and then in this verse 27, the people of Israel under the time of the judges, they cried to him in their time of distress. Same word. Overwhelming emotional sense of confinement and restriction. What do you need to do? Cry out to God and believe that he's still a God who hears. He heard, verse 27, "You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers."

Again and again and again this prayer is filled with the praise of God's great character, his justice. Verse 35, "Your great goodness." The great, the mighty, the awesome God who keeps lovingkindness. But not only that but also his actions. At my count at least 61 verbs that describe what God did. He's not a God who just is and who's disinterested. There is no room for a deistic view of God. That's the idea that God's a clockmaker, he made the world and he just sits off to the side and he's kind of disinterested. The God of the Bible is not like that at all. The God of the Bible is very involved in every single thing that's going on. In fact, he's holding all things together. He's actually so actively involved in our lives, Christ himself, Colossians 1 says, "In Him all things consist," literally "hold together." He's holding the molecules of the universe together actively. That's how involved he is. If he were to forget for a moment, literally things would blow apart.

But not only that, not only is he just sustaining in a way of maintaining creation, he's actively involved in the lives of his people. Sixty-one verbs. As you read through it, "You give, gave," over and over and over. "You've brought him out. You gave him a name. You found him faithful. You made a covenant with Abram. You fulfilled Your promises. You saw the affliction of the people in Egypt. You heard their cries. You performed signs and wonders. You knew their suffering. You made a name for Yourself. You divided the sea. You hurled the opposing army in it. With a pillar You led them, pillar of cloud by day. You led them. Pillar of fire by night to show them the way to go." God came down and spoke with them at Mount Sinai, gave them his law, made known his holy Sabbath, laid down his commandments. "You provided bread from heaven. You brought forth water from a rock. You told them to enter the land and possess it. You swore to them to give it to them." Then the wonderful verbs over and over, "You did not forsake them." They kept turning away from You but You did not forsake them. You did not withhold Your manna from them. You gave them water again even after they had rebelled. You

provided for them in the wilderness. You brought them into the land. You subdued nations before them. You delivered them from oppression." We just read about that. "You heard their cries. You heard. You heard. You heard. You heard and every time You acted."

That's the God of the Bible and when you understand that, when you understand who he is and you put your circumstances and you look at them now in light of the Scriptures, you look at them through the word of God. I love what John Calvin says that putting on the Scriptures is like putting on spectacles. You can't make sense out of life until you put on your spectacles. When you put on the spectacles of special revelation, the word of God, and now you can see. And what's happening here in the life of the people of God is their spectacles are getting put on. It's not quite as easy as just doing this, though. It's sometimes it takes clinging to the word, meditating on the word, hearing the word, speaking the word, sitting with other believers who challenge you – and listen to me – sitting with other believers who challenge you and who offend you by telling you you need to do something and you put away your pride and you humble yourself and you listen. That's what these people are doing. They're humbling themselves under the word and in doing that, they have a radically different perspective on their circumstances, a revolutionary perspective on their circumstances.

And God will do the same for you. He will give you a revolutionary perspective on your circumstances. His word does not fail. He says in Hebrews 11:6 without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to him must believe that he is and he is a rewarder of all who diligently seek him. When you go to the word and you go to the word in a humble attitude asking the Lord to speak to you, to change you, to transform you, to reorient your thinking, to reorient your life, and you cling to his word and you cling to his word and you know that he will bless you because he said that he will and you believe his promise, he will not fail you. Now listen, he may test and deepen and strengthen your faith by making you wait. That's his normal way. It's not like Christianity and biblical faith is not like a vending machine. You don't just, nowadays you don't even put money in them, I guess, right? It used to be you had to have the right change or whatever, you put money in and you had to pull the lever. God's not like that. He's interested in a relationship and real life change and he knows that our hearts are so hardened that part of what breaks it up is the seeking and seeking and seeking and seeking. That's how we actually get to a place where now we're ready to receive.

So don't be discouraged. If you're in a place in your life where you feel like as you look at your circumstances, they're bleak, your future is dismal, you feel surrounded and pressed in and overwhelmed and you've been trying to have a perspective biblically, you've been trying to seek the Lord, don't stop. Keep on holding onto God, holding onto his word, and get more into his word and more under his word, not merely listening though but doing what he says. In fact, that brings us to the third point. We don't just need a realistic appraisal, we don't just see a realistic appraisal of our circumstances, a revolutionary perspective on our circumstances, but we need a radical approach to our circumstances. How did this happen? How did this spiritual revival happen? I mentioned they heard a lot of preaching but they didn't merely hear preaching. This is so important: they acted on

what they heard. They didn't wait until everything, they didn't just like sit under, listen to sermon, listen to sermon, listen to sermon, wait for God to magically do it. That's not the way God works. He lets us be involved in the process of believing and trusting and part of believing is walking by faith, stepping out in belief that he's going to do it.

You see this in a number of ways. First of all, when they hear the word, they hear back in chapter 8 of Nehemiah, they respond to the word from their hearts, they're brokenhearted, they didn't just hear it in a merely intellectual way, they saw their sin, they saw the glory of God and they responded to it but when they were told don't be grieved by the authorities in their life, don't be grieved, go home, celebrate, eat the fat portions, give to those who don't have anything, go home and celebrate, this is a day of joy, what did they do? They did what they were told to do. They went and obeyed. And when they came the next day and they read from the word of God and the word of God said go out and celebrate the Feast of Booths with olive branches, wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, verse 15, to make booths, as it is written, verse 16, chapter 8, so the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves. They did what the word said. They didn't wait until everything felt better. They saw what God said and they obeyed as they went.

Do you see that? This is the missing ingredient a lot of times for us. We hear and we hear and we hear but we don't obey and we think we're hearing and we're hearing and we're hearing but really biblically to hear is to obey. In fact, one of the Hebrew words for "obey" is merely the word "hear" in its root. The Jewish mind was to hear is to obey. It's more of a Western mindset that hear, think about it, theorize about it, maybe consider it, forget about it, don't obey it. You see that, remember when Paul preached in Athens? It says that the people he preached to, these people gathered up in Athens every day just to hear the latest ideas, just titillated them. Let's just think about it. Don't approach the word of God that way. If you approach the word of God that way, you will not hear from the Lord. The one who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of all who diligently seek him.

So they obey what they hear. In fact, they act on what they hear even in chapter 9, verse 1, when they gather together now after they've done all of the feasting they were supposed to do according to the word of God, they still are under conviction. They gather and their hearts are in it. They assemble in verse 1 with fasting and sackcloth and with dirt upon them. They separated themselves from all foreigners. You see, they were acting on what they knew, what God had shown them. Whatever it was, they did. Now they weren't glorying in their works. They weren't seeking God by works but they were seeking him in humility by faith but faith acts. They put themselves under the word consistently and they did what it said.

Turn with me to James 1. This is the New Testament book those of you who have been here a while we were in before we went to Ezra/Nehemiah. We went through the book of James. James 1:21-25. James was writing to Jewish believers who even though they had more of a mindset than the Greeks to act on things, they were struggling with the same tendency of not doing what they knew they should do.

Verse 21 of James 1, "Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls." The word of God he's saying here is able to save your souls. The word of God is perfect, restoring the soul. You see, he's saying that same thing here. But it's not merely hearing.

What does he say next? Verse 23, "For if anyone is a hearer." What does it mean to implant the word. I'm sorry, verse 22, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." Prove yourselves doers of the word. Hearers delude themselves. To hear and to hear and to hear and to not change is to be under a delusion.

Look what he says next. "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was." That's a very effective image. He's basically saying you look at yourself in a mirror and you see there's something wrong, your hair looks crazy, whatever, and you don't address it. So you walk out with that. Some of you don't have this problem as much as others, you have less hair. As I've gotten less and less hair, my hair gets more and more wild. It's age. I don't know. I could have the craziest looking hairdos when I don't realize it. I just move my hand and Patti will be like fixing my hair. You know, "Ty, you must have done something with your hair." I don't even know it because I could look in a mirror regularly just to make sure I don't go out looking like, you know, how could anybody respect you when your hair is doing all this stuff? But imagine you look at the mirror, you see the problem and then you just walk away and forget it. That's what it's like to read the word, to hear the word, to be challenged by the word and not to obey what you have been shown and that is delusional.

He says in verse 25, "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does." What he's saying is the same thing that Nehemiah 9 is telling us, that when you hear the word, I mean, how do you change, how do you change your view of your circumstances, how do you live triumphantly, how can you be more than a conqueror in the midst of suffering? It's with the power of the word of God changing and reorienting the way you see your circumstances but it won't change and reorient the way you see your circumstances unless you obey little by little what you see. You may be only able to do one thing from this and it doesn't feel like it's the most relevant thing. Often it is that way. In fact, I'll tell you this from my experience in counseling people, often the problems where people are not listening to counseling is they feel like whatever is being dealt with is not what they really need. They have a better understanding of their own hearts, they think, than the person God's placed in their life. I'm not saying you trust implicitly everything. No, you test it by the word. You be a Berean. But have a disposition to submit. I might not see the big problem just like I can't see what's wrong with my face. Somebody else can and so be humble, humble yourself under that and submit to it.

So it's not just in the counseling room, this is what the Christian life is to be in the church all the time, speaking to one another, admonishing one another, confessing our sins to one another, listening to one another, being quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, which came right before the verses we just read in James 1. Be ready to listen. Be ready to humble yourself under the word. And if you have that disposition and you make adjustments in your life when you see things that God's saying this is the way to think about it, this is what I need to do, do it and do it in faith and don't look for immediately like an instant change in everything. Little by little obey God and what's going to happen is over time what's going to happen is not the change in your circumstances, the change that's going to happen is in you and it's much better than changing your circumstances because if you change circumstances, you still take the same problems in your heart into those changed circumstances, then it's no better off at all anyway.

But God is so good. He's not in the business of changing our circumstances on every whim. He puts us in the fire for a reason but he means for us to seek him all the more in the moment and we do that by clinging to Jesus Christ through his word. He is our righteousness. He is our victory. What Christ has done for us justifies us. What Christ has done for us sanctifies us. It's all about faith but faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ and faith steps out and obeys. It rests. It trusts. And the irony is, I love that picture of Jesus in Matthew 11 when he says, "Come to Me you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest." Isn't that a great verse? "Come unto Me you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest." Christ is saying that to you today. Some of you need that, all of us need it but some of us really need it today. What does he say? "I will give you rest." And the next verse is so surprising. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me." What is the yoke? The yoke is not an instrument of rest. The yoke is an instrument of work. The yoke is what you put on two oxen when they're getting ready not to rest, go back in the barn. No, when they're coming out of the barn and getting ready to plow the field. Jesus says, "Yoke yourself to Me. Come unto Me and I will give you rest. Yoke yourself to Me and work, act, do what I'm telling you to do," and what you're going to find out, the next verse is so important, "Come unto Me you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me for My yoke is easy and My burden is light and you will find rest for your souls." When you yoke yourself to Jesus and you work alongside Jesus, you find it is the ultimate best. It is satisfying. It is wonderful.

And what happens then in these situations, we realize that, hey, what we're here for is not to change our circumstances, we're here to walk with God in our circumstances. We're here to walk with Jesus through these circumstances. We're here, if it's a terrible diagnosis that we get from the doctor, we're here to look like Jesus would look walking through this circumstance. We're here if it's to die that way, it's to die like Jesus would die walking through this circumstance. If it's to walk with your spouse in that moment, it's to do it like Jesus would do walking with his spouse in this circumstance because in that the glory of God is made known and the fulfillment of our hearts is found in him in the moment. That's where God is working and it's the word of God, only the word of God can reorient us to that kind of mindset. We all think selfishly naturally but the word of

God is mighty. It's living and active. It'll deal with our hearts. So we've got to let it loose to each other and we've got to humble ourselves under it.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your word, that You are a God who came down and spoke. You spoke from heaven and then You gave Your word through Moses and through all the prophets. You've given us a perfect revelation. The law of the Lord was perfect and now we have 66 books that are perfect, everything we need for life and godliness but, Lord, we need faith. We need faith. Some here don't know You and they need faith and they need repentance. Help them to cling to You in Your word and to believe the promises of God, that You save all who humble themselves and come to You, that Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice paying for all the sins of everyone who would ever believe; every single sin past, present and future, He suffered for it. And not only that, He takes away our sins and He gives us His righteousness and He makes us stand before You able to come into the very throne room of God, we who are filthy yet in Christ we are righteous. And not only does He give us justification, the ability to come into the throne room...