

Reflection Guide

Nehemiah 8

The Big Idea:

God's word is central in the lives of God's people. God's word is so accessible to us today, along with resources about it, different versions of it, and thousands upon thousands of sermons that expound on it. With its being so accessible to us, the question for us is have we taken it for granted? Has it lost its value in our eyes? What does it mean for God's word to be central in our lives?

The Sovereignty of God's Word

If we put ourselves in the shoes of the people in Nehemiah 8, perhaps the greatest reality for them is that God's word is sovereign and all powerful. They've seen the word of God in that it foretold their captivity, it foretold their freedom from captivity, and it foretold their restoration and return to the city. Nothing could stand in the way of God's word. It always accomplishes God's purposes and nothing stands in its way. God's word prevailed over all other words - false prophets, Nebuchadnezzar's, Artaxerxes, Sanballat and Tobiah, and the Arabs.

What things in your life cause you to doubt the sovereignty and power of God's word?
What would change for you if you trusted in the sovereignty of God's word?

Responsibility to God's word. (Neh 8:1-8)

"And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel."

The people assemble outside of the Water Gate to hear Ezra read from the Torah. Over 50,000 men, women, and children listen attentively to God's word being read for over 5 hours. Ezra and thirteen men take the time allotted to read from the Law and explain its meaning and application to the people.

These people felt a responsibility to the Word of God. Today, the word responsibility is usually used to indicate an obligation, or a burden of some sort, like when teenagers hear that their parents will be giving them "responsibilities" to handle. But what motivates these people here is much more than an obligation or an "ought to". This event isn't burdensome. These people are committed to God and they are committed to His Word. It was a grace that after all they had been through, and after all that they had brought upon themselves and their nation because of their sin, that God would again providentially give them His Word.

Their responsibility to God's word was marked by

- i. Their Desire for God's word
- ii. Their Reverence for God's word

What causes you to treat God's word like a "chore" to do?
Whose words are you more committed to?
(parent, spouse, someone who hurt you, friend, employer)

What keeps you from seeing your need for God's word?
What in your life might indicate that you have taken God's word for granted/regarded it as common?

3 Responses to God's Word (Neh 8:1-18)

So we have seen the people's responsibility to the word which was marked by their desire for it and their reverence for it. But their commitment to it doesn't stand alone. It doesn't simply end with just *knowing* and *wanting* to make God's word central. Their responsibility to the word is followed by a response to the word. These people desired God's word and their desire led them to a whole-hearted response that affected every part of them. From verses 1-18 we can see that their response was Intellectual, Spiritual and Volitional.

An Intellectual Response

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

The people listened attentively and sought to understand, to see, and to examine the meaning of God's word and they gave thought to how it applied to their lives. Much like our gatherings, the word was explained to them paragraph by paragraph, taking time to understand the application for their lives.

What distractions or excuses keep you from devoting mental effort in understanding God's word?
Do you tend to think more about application for others over application for yourself? Why?

A Spiritual Response

This is all in response to God's word. These people were once exiles, rejected by the very same God who was now restoring them, bringing them back to the city they were once evicted from, and He has once again given them His word, and is re-establishing His covenant with them! What Grace!

1) Worship

"And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground."

As they hear God's words, what is taking place in their hearts expresses itself in worship. Their hands are lifted, they are bowing down with their faces to the ground, and their mouths open to agree with Ezra's blessing the Lord. Our expressions play a large part in our relationships with one another, but often seem to be either far too extreme or non-existent when it comes to God. How is worship a part of our response to God's word?

When is the last time you responded in thankfulness and praise to God for His word?
What did that look like for you?

2) Brokenness & Contrition

"And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep. For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.'"

God's word had worked in their hearts, exposing their true condition - causing their brokenness over sin. The people were mourning, weeping, and lamenting over their sin.

What keeps you from allowing God's word to have this effect on you? (pride, self-preservation, fear of being exposed, apathy?)

How is this brokenness and contrition different from self-pity or worldly sorrow?
What sin do you need to be broken over?

3) Joy

Although brokenness and conviction over our sins is one of the responses to God's word being central to God's people- God's word doesn't leave us there. Nehemiah 8:10 tells us what Nehemiah said to the people after seeing their mourning and brokenness over their sin. He said *"Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

Has despair, guilt, and shame been your only response to God's word? Why?

What are you looking to for joy?

(Good works, approval from others, satisfying your own guilt)

How do you think God perceives you?

Why do you feel that joy is an undeserved response for you?

How can Jesus' sacrifice give you God's joy in this moment?

A Volitional Response

Verse 14 states that *"And they found written in the Law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem."*

So the people and the leaders read about the Feast of Tabernacles that God instructed to take place in the seventh month and they sought to obey it. They read about the Feast of Tabernacles in the Law, and verse 16 tells us that they proceed to celebrate the feast by making tents for themselves remembering when their ancestors lived in tents when the Lord brought them out of Egypt .

Although verse 17 tells us that this was the first time that this feast was celebrated since the days of Joshua, what this most likely means is that this was the first time that the feast was celebrated in full obedience in a spirit of rejoicing. Ezra 3:1-6 also records this feast being celebrated, but the motive behind the people's obedience was different, it was out of fear of their enemies. They carried out the feast and its offerings in an attempt to sustain God's protection. Ezra 3:4 states that *" They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the people of the lands..."* This Feast of Tabernacles in Nehemiah 8 is being celebrated with "very great rejoicing" as a response to God's goodness and in an attempt to be faithful to His word. Notice that their obedience is not simply out of duty to God's word. It is done with delight in God's word. It is not done with attempts to secure God's acceptance and protection, its done because God has accepted them and He has made provision and protection for them.

How have you used obedience in an attempt to secure God's acceptance?

What might indicate that you have used obedience to God's word to obtain God's acceptance?

(pride when we are doing good / depression when we fail)

(focus only on God's commands to the neglect of what God has done for us?)

What would grace-driven obedience to God's word look like in your life now?