

## **NEHEMIAH 8**

**The Word of God begins to function again**

**Nehemiah 8 : 9 – 12**  
**The Word of God begins to function again**  
**in the lives of God's people**

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

**Introduction.** Today we may have our prayer service for the Lord's seasonal blessings. We know that we depend on the Lord's goodness, and we will ask Him for His blessing in this new season of sowing and reaping. We also continue the preaching on the book of Nehemiah, and we may say that chapter 8 gives us an excellent direction for our prayer this morning.

This chapter tells us about a gathering of all Israel in the rebuilt city of Jerusalem. Things have been going well with Israel under Nehemiah's governorship. Not only was the city rebuilt and being re-populated, but the Israelites (verse 1) had also "settled in their towns." Life was taking on a regular and peaceful order.

About this gathering we note two important facts. First, it took place in the seventh month, and then most likely on the first day of the month. This is significant, for the seventh month marked the beginning of the new Jewish calendar year. They begin the year with God, gathering in His holy city.

This seventh month (our March – April) was also the month of the spring rains, the time of the first fruits of the field. The people of Israel certainly in this time had good reason to gather together in order to ask the LORD for His blessing over their labour so that a good harvest would follow. And we may also say: this is perhaps the first time in many years that such a gathering was held! We see how the people are being united in their faith and worship of the LORD.

Secondly, we note the fact that “all the people assembled as one man.” Normally only the men went to Jerusalem and the temple, but as the new year started, everyone went. We read in verse 2 of “the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.” Men, women, and children! Was not the entire people dependent on God’s blessing?

But perhaps the most distinctive feature of this gathering is that it had a special purpose. We read in verse 1 that they [the people] “told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had commanded for Israel.” Before the people ask anything from the LORD, they must listen to the LORD. God’s blessing always demands obedience. And so the people have gathered to hear the reading of the Law. This will be done by Ezra, the scribe, who had come with the first wave of returned exiles thirteen years earlier. What we read in this chapter is how the place of God’s Word is restored in the midst of the people in Jerusalem.

This is the heart of the matter. You can rebuild the city with solid wall and strong gates. You can even select people from all over to live in the city. You can give much money for the maintenance of the temple. But what is it all about? That the Word of God begins to function again in the lives of God’s people; that they learn to live before the LORD in obedience and trust.

Ezra stood on a high wooden platform built especially for this occasion. Around him stood men who were known as temple servants and priests, men who were instructed in the law and able to teach it. As Ezra opened the Book of the Law, notice that all the people rise. They heard the law standing! And we are told that Ezra read the law from

daybreak till noon, that is, for six hours! Indeed, everyone stood listening for six hours, and we are informed that the people listened attentively. I guess we do not have to feel sorry for ourselves when we sit in our comfortable pews for about an hour and a half at most. I read somewhere that there are still churches in the Far East where the people stand for the duration of the service.

Notice the tremendous respect that the people show for the Word of God (verses 5 and 6). The very moment Ezra opens the book all the people rise! Ezra then first praises the LORD; the people respond by lifting their hands and saying Amen, Amen. And then they all bow down and worship the LORD with their faces to the ground. This indicates that the people highly esteem the Word of God and pledge *a priori* to obey it. They worship God who in His grace gave that Word. We may not do all these things in our services, but we too must have also a deep respect for the Word and reverence for God Himself. The only real response the LORD wants to hear is the "Amen," not just the word, but the commitment expressed in the word: so it is and so we shall live. It is with this openness that we must listen to the reading and explaining of the Word of God.

For there was also explaining. We read in the verses 7 and 8 how the Levites moved around among the people, also reading from the law, and making it clear, explaining it further, so that the people could fully understand what was being said. For is the purpose of all reading and preaching not that the people of God fully know and understand the LORD's will? Much may have changed since Nehemiah's time, but the basic matter has not changed: we all must hear the reading and explanation of God's Word with reverence and an open heart. This is still central and essential to our worship today.

What we want to focus on now is how the people, when hearing the Law, begin to mourn and weep. We want to know why there is so much consternation. And we read how Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites tell the people not to mourn and weep. The consternation must turn into a celebration. We want to know the basis for this celebration.

Actually, the text does not give us specifically the reason for the sadness of the people. We do read that Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites

tell the people very strongly: do not mourn or weep, do not grieve. Be still, do not grieve! We read this at least three times in our text, but nowhere is it stated exactly why they were all grieving and clamouring.

This weeping and mourning can really be understood from only one angle. The people are greatly burdened when they hear the reading of God's Word because they hear, besides the blessings of the covenant, also the curses of that covenant. Some explainers suggest that this was perhaps the first time that many of these people had heard the law of God read in this fashion, complete with the promises and the sanctions. Whatever the case may be, they are certainly impressed by what they hear. And everyone realizes at least two things. If only God's people in the past had truly listened to the law, how different would things have gone. And even now, after all the pain and anguish of the exile, they realize that they have not learned much. There is still so much disobedience that they can only expect God's righteous judgment to come over them. They will experience not God's blessing, but His curse.

So there is great consternation among the assembled gathering of the Israelites. It is, as Paul wrote later in Romans, through the law that knowledge of sin comes about. They realize that it has been and still is worse than they had thought. How far have they wandered away from the true service of the LORD. Is it not impossible that the LORD would still be gracious and forgive them? So the reading of God's Word leads to great sadness: mourning, weeping, and grieving. These three words show us that Israel's repentance at this point is deep and true.

"Mourning" indicates the great sadness which befalls everyone. The "weeping" is the audible expression of this sadness. And the "grieving" indicates that all this was not just a superficial emotion, but was accompanied by a strong sense of unworthiness, perhaps even a feeling of despair: we have really forfeited all rights to God's covenant blessings, and we may expect nothing but God's covenant wrath.

So this whole assembly, which was organized to lead Israel to rejoice and trust in the LORD, threatens to achieve the opposite: the people fear the worst. They are convicted of sin, and they realize that

their past and present distress is the result of their own disobedience. And notice that our text says: they “all” (verse 9) had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. It was not a matter of just a few people concluding that they had totally forfeited their rights, but the whole assembly was convicted of sin. The general mood is one of sadness.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks in Lord’s Day 2: from where do you know your misery? And the answer is: out of the law of God. Here we see how true this is. The reading of the law leads to a deep understanding and recognition of unworthiness and a sense of being worthy of damnation. There are no excuses. People do not say: Oh well, such is life, nobody’s perfect so let’s just continue. No, they are deeply convinced that they have forfeited all rights to God’s blessing. And we must understand, in Old Testament terms the curse was very material: no crops, no cattle born, no enjoying of the fruits of the vine, but famine, poverty and the risk of again being exploited by the many enemies. The reading of God’s Word therefore made such a deep impression because it affected the life of everyone present.

What do we learn from this? I think we learn again that we must come to confess that we have sinned and have no rights to the Lord’s blessing. We cannot come before God in our prayer except in true confession of sin and a deep sense of unworthiness. This is the evidence of a broken and contrite heart; a heart God searches for in the prayers of His children. For us it is all the more serious, because we have been blessed so much more in Christ our Lord. He has paid for all our sins and delivered us from all the power of the devil and even filled us with His Spirit. But what do we do? Are we in every respect disciples of Christ? Do we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness? Even more so today, the Word of God must convict us of sin. Prayer is and remains a matter of humbling yourself before God. From the vantage point of the people, recognizing their sins, it is a time of prayer and fasting.

These people had all been through so much, and yet they had learned so little. Is that not how our lives go? How long does it take us to appreciate truly our sinful wretchedness? We’d rather not even hear

about such things. We would prefer perhaps to list some of our achievements and list our sacrifices for the Lord. We have done this and that, and perhaps more. But are we any better in ourselves than the people of Israel in Nehemiah's time?

The reading of God's Law and Word, the hearing of the preaching, must always be a journey of true self-discovery. Not: how do I see myself; but: how does my life look in the light of God's Word? And we will discover: it does not look good. This deep truth is experienced here by Israel, and it is also honestly and sincerely expressed.

Now the remarkable thing is that Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites are not so pleased with this reaction of the people. They do not say that this weeping and mourning is wrong in itself – for it is proper as such – but they say that this is not to be the important element at this time. Notice how they say (also three times): this day is sacred to the LORD, your God, our LORD! This is a sacred day.

What does that mean? It means that the LORD has gathered His people for a special reason. This day – that is the first day of the new year, the day that marks the beginning of many festivities, also the passover feast and the day of atonement – is sacred to the LORD. He has a very special purpose with this day. It is not to lead His people to consternation but to celebration.

It is a day when Israel's unworthiness is noted and confessed, but even more a day on which God's grace is to be experienced. It is the LORD who has made a new beginning with His people, who has brought them back into the inheritance of their fathers and allowed them to rebuild the temple and the city; a day when He comes to dwell again in their midst through the ministry of atonement. And therefore the day must be one of celebration. The dismay over sin must be conquered by the delight in God's grace.

God did not call His people together to proclaim to them that He has rejected them. He calls them to hear the Gospel of their redemption. Sin is not overlooked. It is never overlooked, and the next chapter deals at length with the necessary and elaborate confession of sin, but first the proclamation of peace must and shall prevail. Therefore it must be a

festive day, marking a new era in the covenant between God and His people.

We read in verse 10 that Nehemiah says, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks. . . ." This may be a reference to the sacrifices which were to be brought that day, and of which parts, the best parts even, were to be eaten by the people as a sign of fellowship with God. It also means: strengthening the ties of fellowship with one another: send some to those who have nothing prepared. Let everyone, all Israel, share in, rejoice in, be reminded of the grace and fellowship with God. It is a feast day and must remain so. The reading of the law does not lead only to grieving over sin, but also to a delight in God's grace and goodness, and this must prevail. It is on this foundation of forgiving and renewing grace that Israel may begin to live again as the people of God.

Then we also read the well-known words. "The joy of the LORD is your strength." These words have been made into the refrain of a hymn, I believe. The question is how they must be understood. The joy of the LORD, does that mean the joy which the LORD has in His people or the joy that the people have in the LORD? It may not make much difference either way, perhaps, but I take it to mean the joy which the LORD has in His people.

God Himself has brought these people together in His holy city. He does not overlook their sins but accepts their sacrifices, and He rejoices in His people. God did not call them together to destroy and demolish – or perhaps demoralize – them, but he called them together to find His joy in them, in their redemption and renewal. God finds joy in His restored people. He delights in His church. These people are the object of His love and the reason for His joy.

Nehemiah is saying: God did not call you together to reject you, but to draw you even closer to Him. Take courage in that! Find your strength in that. Be encouraged by the fact that God finds pleasure in you despite your sins and that He will fulfil to you all His promises. The joy of the LORD – the joy and pleasure that He has in you as His people – that is your strength.



What is our strength? What did we come here for today? To be convicted of sin? Yes, certainly. But we came to hear again that the Lord takes pleasure in us, therefore grants His grace to us, and that is the basis of our prayer today. Now of course we know that the joy which God has in us is closely linked to the joy which He has in His only begotten Son. When the Lord regards us – as individuals and as gathered congregation – He finds joy in us because of what His Son has done: cleansed and redeemed us. That is precisely our strength!

When we gather here today to pray for God's blessings, there is indeed a call to be humble and contrite, but above all we are told that the Lord is pleased with us, will bless us through Jesus Christ our Saviour. That trust and faith must be the very ground and basis of our prayer. Not our self-worth, but our being made worthy in Christ. It is a new season, a new day, it is a time for trust and joy: we can be all the more assured of this in Christ.

It took some effort, I believe, for Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites to convince the people that the joy of the LORD is their strength. But in verse 11 we read that the people did listen. They did go to eat and drink, and to share of their blessings with others. They celebrated with great joy, it says, "because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." They understood that God did love them and would bless them as His restored people.

Yes, they still had a long way to go. The rest of the chapter tells us about the "feast of booths" which they celebrated with a zeal not seen since the days of Joshua. During that time the instruction in the Law of God continued day by day, until it led to a full and deep confession of sin (chapter 9). Church building is an ongoing process of learning and growing in the Word of God. But the basis is laid here: the joy of the LORD is your strength. Begin with God's love and mercy in Christ and then proceed to know the depth and height of that grace. Let the Word become more and more a part of your life.

The question is: do we understand that the joy of the LORD is our strength? Does His Word function in our lives? Do we in this certainty and dedication call on His Name? It was written for our benefit so that

we might learn. Learn about basics – the foundation of grace – and build from there. Let us together believe and celebrate the riches we have in Christ our Saviour, and call upon God in this faith.

AMEN