

# A Unified Purpose

## Nehemiah 8:1-18

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



For the first time in a long time, they all gathered and stood together as one community, one people. In reality, it was longer than anyone one person could remember. It has been over 500 years since their people were all united under one banner and part of one nation. For those gathering together, they had only heard the stories of the days when the great kings of Saul, David, and Solomon ruled over their people. They had only heard stories of being a unified people and the glory of Jerusalem being this shining city on a hill where God's presence dwelled, and all of his people could gather. Yes, they know that they aren't an independent nation. Persia is still in charge. Yes, the city has been restored, and so many of the exiles have returned. Yet, the physical markers of the last 500 years of division, exile, and conflict are still present for all to see. However, none of that matters today. They are a unified people once again. And they gather for a unified purpose, the right worship of God through the public reading of his Word. A city that was in a desperate and desolate position is now alive. A people who were scattered and torn are now gathered and standing together. God's Word, which had been lost and distant, is now being read aloud, and they will come to find that it is living and active. They will have an encounter with the living God through his Word, and they will realize that life moving forward can't be what it was in the past. However, they will need to learn an important lesson before their future is realized, and it is an important lesson for us as well; it is that **future faithfulness starts in the present.**

### 1. Obedience is God's love language.

- a. This section begins a 3-chapter section (8,9,10), all centered around the idea of obedience.
  - i. Nehemiah knew who he was because he knew whose he was.
  - ii. We've said this many times in this series, but all work is only the physical manifestation of the more important work that is going on... the reformation of the identity of God's people.
  - iii. Here is how we will see that inner work be ordered over the next three chapters:
    - 1. **Chapter 8 – Reading of God's Word and Feast of Booths**
    - 2. **Chapter 9 – Confession and Repentance**

### 3. Chapter 10 – Recommitment to Covenant

- iv. Rewind – How have we seen the build-up of this idea in the previous chapters?
  - 1. Chapter 7: Order is important. → Worship flows from identity.
    - a. It is striking that the temple worship is at the heart of everything God's people are doing. The farmers and the goldsmiths and the scribes and the builders and all the other people are not listed by role, but the priests, the Levites, the singers, and the temple servants are. **That is because these were the ones who were supposed to lead the people in worship.**<sup>1</sup>
    - b. **The standard is the standard - This will be the mantra of Nehemiah as we move forward through the rest of the book... God's standard has always been the standard and will always be the standard moving forward.**
  - 2. Chapters 5&6 – Right theology \* Right Methodology
    - a. **Right methodology comes from a right identity. → We see in Nehemiah the impact of being secure in your identity.**
    - b. His right identity enables him to respond wisely and strategically in tough moments.
      - i. **1:4** – Prays for four months after hearing the report.
      - ii. **2:3** – Asks the king for leave and resources in a timely and honorable way.
      - iii. **2:9ff** – Arrives with written authority, military support, and still surveys at night.
        - 1. He also doesn't give away his plans too soon. (2:16)
      - iv. **3:5** – He doesn't let a few nay-sayers derail the team.
      - v. **4** – Prays and takes outside threats seriously.
      - vi. **5** – Listens to internal complaints and leads by example.
  - i. **Key conviction - He (Nehemiah) belong to God** – I.e., His identity is wrapped up in belonging to God's family.
    - 1. More than anything, this is the ultimate lens that influences Nehemiah's worldview.
      - a. **I belong to God, and I am to honor God. Therefore, everything that I do must be filtered through that lens.**
    - 2. We've seen this to be true in his prayer life, his leadership decisions, his response to the people, and in his actions of generosity.
    - 3. **You & Me:** If I saw myself as primarily belonging to God, how would that shape my Monday – Saturday life?
  - b. **Key Truth:** We do not obey because it earns God's love. We obey God because we have experienced his love first. → 1 Jn 3:1 - **"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."**
    - i. This is the primary drive for our future faithfulness... We are prompted to be faithful, because God already has. → **This is the purpose of the Feast of Booths.**
    - ii. We've experienced the fullness of God's love and faithfulness through Jesus.
      - 1. Jn. 1:16-18 - <sup>16</sup>**For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.**  
<sup>17</sup>**For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus**

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<sup>1</sup> Mason, Eric. Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You) (p. 120). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

- Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.
2. Col 1:15 - <sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
  3. Heb. 1:1-3a - Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. <sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.
- iii. Jesus obeyed the Father out of love.
1. Jn. 4:34 – This was Jesus' motivation.
    - a. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.
    - b. In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to the Father 122 times, and 180 times in the Gospels as a whole.
  2. Heb 12:2 – The Father's mission was Jesus' joy.
    - a. <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.
- iv. **Because we've experienced God's love through Jesus... we are compelled to obey out of love.**
1. OT – Israel experienced God's love through the law.
    - a. Deut. 26:16-19 <sup>16</sup> "This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. <sup>17</sup> You have declared today that the LORD is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. <sup>18</sup> And the LORD has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, <sup>19</sup> and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised."
  2. Jn. 14:15-16 – Obey out of love. → Why? Because you've come to see that Jesus is good, and his ways are good and worth obeying / conforming to.
    - a. <sup>15</sup> "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, <sup>17</sup> even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.
- c. **A modern problem:** The radical path of self. → The more we look inward, the more unsatisfied and unfulfilled we become.
- i. The three great untruths.<sup>2</sup> → Haidt & Lukianoff explore the destructive nature of radical inwardness.
    1. What doesn't kill you makes you weaker.
    2. Trust your thoughts and feelings.
    3. It is a battle of good people vs evil people.
  - ii. The un-truth that is going to be exposed in Neh. 8-10 – Trust your thoughts and feelings.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff. *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Penguin Books, 2019.

- iii. **It should not be a surprise to us that a social psychologist and lawyer would discover a truth that the Bible already exposes.**
  - 1. The Bible on the heart:
    - a. Jer. 17: 9-10 - **The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?** <sup>10</sup> **“I the Lord search the heart**
    - b. **and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”**
    - c. Mark 7:21-22 - <sup>20</sup> **And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”**
  - iv. Haidt & Lukianoff assert that we must engage in cognitive behavioral techniques to become resilient against the deception of our thoughts and feelings. <sup>3</sup>
  - v. **In Nehemiah, the message will continue to be that the route to the people’s true freedom is not inward but upward towards God and a subjection of their autonomy to God’s authority.**
    - 1. This is counterintuitive to our nature and opposite of our current cultural narrative.
    - 2. This should not surprise us because, as we have seen, as Christians, we are spiritual exiles in this age. (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-12)
- d. **Obedience is an important ingredient in a faithful life. So, what examples do we see in chapter 8 that spurs on our personal pursuit of faithfulness?**
  - i. But now the people are fresh out of captivity. They have seen Jerusalem half destroyed and built it up again. They have realized that the Scriptures haven’t really been taught and put into practice by them as a nation for centuries. Now they are ready to celebrate God’s faithfulness properly again.<sup>4</sup>
    - 1. So the question is: Where do you draw your strength from? Where do you draw your soul’s resources from? We have to be able to learn this secret: that Christ is the greatest satisfier.<sup>5</sup>
  - ii. **We will see two realities about faithfulness – It doesn’t just happen nor is it instant.**

## **2. Faithfulness is not passive. (vv. 3, 8, 11)**

- a. There is an emphasis on “being attentive” and “understanding” in first 11 verses.
  - i. Faithfulness is not a passive endeavor. I.e., It won’t just happen.
  - ii. We realize the truth of this statement in so many other areas of life:
    - 1. Financial security – Your bank account isn’t full just because you wanted it to be.
      - a. You had to work and learn good and wise habits to handle your money.
    - 2. A healthy marriage / relationships – These don’t happen through good intentions alone.
      - a. We have to routinely work hard at the disciplines of patience, listening, grace, and humility in order foster and grow healthy relationships.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff. *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Penguin Books, 2019.(pp. 36-40)

<sup>4</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 137). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 139). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

3. Any physical skill – It takes time and practice.
  - a. Art – Music – Athletics – Carpentry – Etc.
- iii. **Why would we think that our spiritual lives would be any different than our physical lives?**
  1. But why would we devote ourselves to this pursuit?
  2. Because we have first experienced God's love through Jesus. → We have experienced and found God to be good, trustworthy, and loving and so we are motivated to order our lives around his values, precepts, and truths.
- b. **What are they to gain understanding of? → God's Word.**
  - i. **Why? → Because this is the truth of who they are because of whose they are.**
  - ii. **It should be observed that there is really only one focus of attention in this passage, namely, the reading of the Law.<sup>6</sup>**
    1. Notice the stress on understanding, in verses 2, 3, 7, 8, 12<sup>7</sup>
  - iii. For all its ordinariness, the expression, *the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel*, makes two important and contested points: **first, that what the people called for, and what Ezra ostensibly produced, was no new manifesto but the foundation articles of the faith, laid down at the Exodus; secondly that these were credited with full divine authority.<sup>8</sup>**
  - iv. As for the assembly, it is no small matter that it consisted not of men only, nor adults only, but of *all who could hear with understanding*. The law had always envisaged 'a wise and understanding people', taught from childhood not only the words of God but what the words and rituals meant (Exod. 12:26f.; Deut. 4:6; 6:6ff.; 31:12f.). Mindless superstition was the mark of paganism ('they cannot understand', Isa. 44:18f.), and had been the downfall of an apostate Israel (Hos. 4:6: '**My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge**').<sup>9</sup>
- c. How did Ezra grow in his understanding of God's Word? → **He devoted himself to it.**
  - i. Ezra 7:10: "**For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.**" Note the order of that. **Ezra set his heart first, before anything else. Ezra made his heart receptive to the word of God. Then he studied. Then he also set his heart "to do it."**
  - ii. **When you have your heart set on the word of God, it becomes a part of the matrix of your life.** It changes your value system, your affections, your desires, your direction, your life. Knowing God's word is about letting the word penetrate your own heart first and foremost. That's what was going on with Ezra.<sup>10</sup>
    1. The people saw something in Ezra that was remarkable and asked him to lead them
- d. How did the people grow in their understanding of God's Word? → **They devoted themselves to it!**
  - i. 8:1-6 – Ezra read to us!
  - ii. 8:7-8 – The Levites (priests) explain what it means

<sup>6</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 282.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 115.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 114.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 114.

<sup>10</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 127). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

- iii. 8:9-12 – Illumination (understanding) brings clarity and conviction.
  - 1. Don't be upset... rejoice, God has been faithful.
- iv. 8:13-17 – An opportunity for obedience.
  - 1. Don't delay... be obedient now. → I.e., Faithfulness is not passive.
- v. 8:18 – Ezra continues the Bible lessons.
  - 1. Faithfulness requires obedience.
  - 2. Obedience requires understanding.
  - 3. Understanding comes through the process of learning.
- e. **Warning: Familiarity does not equal understanding. – I.e., Religiosity does not equal relationship.**
  - i. Our cars – We all have familiarity with our cars... how many of us truly understand them?
  - ii. Technology – Again, we all have familiarity with our phones and computers... how many of us understand them so that we can fix them? → How many of us are always on the verge of doing something catastrophic with our tech?!?
  - iii. Relationships – How many of us have been surprised by someone's behavior or response to a situation, and we said, "I guess I didn't really know them."
    - 1. We have familiarity with someone but not understanding.
    - 2. This is the difference between a friend and an acquaintance.
  - iv. **God** – Is it possible to have familiarity with God and not truly understand or know him?
    - 1. Unfortunately, yes. → This is precisely where the people are at.
      - a. It is why they need re-forming.
    - 2. **It is also the place that you and I can quickly drift to if we are not intentional.**
      - a. Jesus reminds us that we must abide in him. (Jn 15:5)
        - i. **<sup>5</sup>I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.**
      - b. **μένω - menō** – this word literally means to stay or to continue.
      - c. The action of abiding is not passive or accidental. → I.e., We are not going to wake up one day and reflect, "Huh, how did I grow close to God?"
      - d. Again, this would never happen in any other relationship. → Instead, when we don't actively pursue relationships they drift apart and grow cold.
  - v. **Rules without relationship foster rebellion.**
    - 1. God does not ask us to obey him outside the context of relationship.
    - 2. Instead, he offers us restoration in relationship and the resulting desire for you and me is that of obedience.
    - 3. When we force ourselves to obey God outside of relationship, we begin to grow bitter and rebellious hearts.
      - a. Or, we begin to find that the things of God don't satisfy any longer. → This is not that God's ways are now somehow unsatisfactory, it is that our hearts have grown cold to the fulfillment that they bring.
    - 4. Rebellion can simply be a heart grown cold:
      - a. This is what Paul means when he says: **"<sup>26</sup>For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions."** – Rom. 1:26

- b. Jesus says it this way, “ **And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.** <sup>13</sup> **But the one who endures to the end will be saved.** <sup>14</sup> – Matt. 24:12-14
- c. To the Ephesian church: “<sup>4</sup> **But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.** <sup>5</sup> **Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.**” – Rev. 2:4-5

### 3. Faithfulness is a process. (v.18)

- a. What is the process of faithfulness? → Doing the next right Godly thing.
  - i. What was the next right Godly thing for them?
    - 1. Read God’s Word.
    - 2. Celebrate the Feast of Booths.
  - ii. Too often the modern solution is not process but immediate perfection. (v.18)
- b. **How does learning prompt our faithfulness?** → We gain the clarity of truth and the skills to act on that truth.
  - i. What is strikingly apparent is the royal reception given to the Word of God. This day was to prove a turning-point. From now on, the Jews would be predominantly ‘**the people of a book**’. At the dedication of Solomon’s Temple there had been glory and beauty, natural and supernatural, to overwhelm the worshippers. Here the focus, apart from a wooden platform, was a scroll—or more exactly, what was written in it. Its opening brought the people to their feet.<sup>11</sup>
- c. **The process of remembering** – The point of the feast is not the activity of the feast itself, it is the action of remembering the truth of God’s faithfulness.
  - i. A rabbi friend once told me, “**We remember so that we don’t forget.**”
    - 1. This seems so evident that it feels painfully clear.
    - 2. The purpose for the Feast of Booths (vv. 13-18) → God is faithful!
  - ii. **Feast of Booths:** a Jewish festival in which people build and live in temporary shelters (or booths), to remember the exodus. This is known in modern times as Sukkot.<sup>12</sup>
    - 1. It happens in the fall around harvest.
    - 2. 2022 – Sukkot began on 10/9 and ends on 10/16.
  - iii. Leviticus 23 contains the instructions about this Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. This was the last festival of the year, and many called it the Great Feast. The idea was to point back to the days when Israel experienced God’s faithfulness in the wilderness. It was a reminder of all the sin and grumbling that God had put up with over that time, **and how gracious God had been to them even so. It was a celebration of that reality.**<sup>13</sup>
    - 1. There were various aspects of this festival, but the key one for our purposes is in Leviticus 23:42-43: “You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”
    - 2. **The entire point of this festival was to remember the faithfulness of God.**
  - iv. Don’t weep... Rejoice, God is faithful! (v.10)

<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 115–116.

<sup>12</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 198). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 135). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

1. As God's Word is read aloud, it convicts the people and they begin to weep.
  2. This is not a wrong response... they'll get to the work of confession and repentance in chapter 9.
  3. For now, they need to celebrate that God is and has always been and always will be faithful. → Their celebration results in right praise of God.
- v. **Question: How active are we in our remembering of what God has done?**
1. What rhythms, structures, practices do we have in place to cause us to remember?
    - a. Daily, weekly, annually?
    - b. This is part of the gift of Sabbath. → A day to rest and remember.
  2. This is the principle of repetition. → Over and over again.
  3. When we remember in community we show the way to others.
    - a. Important: People copy what we do, not what we say.
  4. When we remember, we need to be honest – don't overexaggerate, don't sugarcoat, and don't demonize.
    - a. If something was hard, it's ok to say it was hard.
    - b. If something was disappointing, it's ok to say it was disappointing.
    - c. If something was good or refreshing, don't build it up for more than it was.
  5. When we remember, we need to remember the reason.
    - a. Feast of Booths was not about the feast, it was about God's faithfulness.
- d. If we want to be a faithful people moving forward, we must not be swindled into thinking that faithfulness is passive (will just happen) or is instant (it is a process).