

We are going through the Old Testament book of Nehemiah this fall. Nehemiah is the man primarily responsible for refounding the nation of Israel after their exile in Babylon. The story begins in 445 BC, and there is a lot to learn about leadership and about building up the church and the people of God. In ch. 1, Nehemiah hears about the devastating state of Jerusalem, and receives permission from King Artaxerxes of the Persian Empire to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. In ch. 2 he surveys the scene and rallies the people together to the task. In 3-4 he assembles the people, builds the wall, and deals with some opposition. Chapters 5-6 were all about spiritual warfare as Nehemiah tries to finish the wall. This morning we'll be in 7-8, as the wall is completed and they move on to the next phase, spiritually building up the community. We'll start with Nehemiah 7:1-5.

***Nehemiah 7:1-** After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed. ² I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do. ³ I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses." ⁴ Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. ⁵ So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there:*

They have finished the gates, the doors, the walls. The wall was done, but the work was far from over. Nehemiah needed to keep the people protected and populate the city, so he appointed men who he could trust. Most people were living in the nearby rural areas, so he needed to figure out how to increase the population in Jerusalem. He finds the genealogical record that Ezra had recorded in Ezra 2 – that's the rest of Neh 7, which we'll skip. And most importantly, they needed to be built into a mature, godly people. That's what brings us to Chapter 8.

Read Neh 8:1-8:

***NIV Nehemiah 8:1** - all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. ² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from*

daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. ⁴ Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. ⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ The Levites-- Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah-- instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

They bring out the book of the Law of Moses – Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy - and Ezra reads it to all who can understand. Ezra was a scribe – priest, scholar, and teacher of the law. He is up high on a platform with other Levites. And the Levites translate and interpret to groups of people, as they all spoke Aramaic and the law was in Hebrew. The law had not been taught during the exile, so the people were eager to hear what God required of them.

Neh 8:9-12 -

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve." ¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

The rest of the chapter talks about re-establishing Sukkot, the Feast of Booths. But I want to focus especially on Nehemiah 8:9-12, and pay attention to two things from this passage about law & grace:

1) **A proper understanding of God's law should cause mourning**

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

He would have started with the ten commandments and gone on from there:

***Exodus 20:2-17** - "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ³ "You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. ⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. ¹² "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³ "You shall not murder. ¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ "You shall not steal. ¹⁶ "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. ¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

Imagine being there. Maybe you would think you were good on some points, but eventually you would realize that you have not measured up to God's requirements. And also that you deserved punishment before a holy God.

They are realizing God's holiness and how far short they have fallen of God's holy standard. Mourning and grief are the natural result.

And the Old Testament law is nothing compared to the standard Jesus set:

Matthew 5:21-30 - "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca, 'is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. ²³ "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Matthew 5:48 - Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Some of you may be under the impression that you are good enough. That God certainly favors you because of your goodness. You are mistaken. If you truly listened to the law, you would see that you stand accused before a holy God.

Romans 3:23 - for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death

Some of you compare yourselves to others. Some presume that God grades on a curve, or presume on his forgiveness. But you would be wrong. God is holy, and He demands holiness from us.

What is the purpose of the law? To show you what a good work is. But also to show you your need for a Savior.

Galatians 2:15-16 - "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the **law**, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the **law**, because by observing the **law** no one will be justified.

Galatians 3:23-25 - Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

The law shows you your need for a Savior. No one is righteous. Not one.

2) A proper understanding of God's grace replaces our mourning with joy.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

God had not cast them off, but had restored their city and taught them His Word. Revel in the joy of the Lord! Enjoy and do not grieve! Joy is deeper when we understand the depth of our sin and the reality of God's holiness.

Thankfully, we have more than just the words of Nehemiah. We have the gospel.

Think about it – you do not deserve any of this. It is all an undeserved gift.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Romans 8:1-2 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

The joy of the Lord is their strength. They are home in God's city. He has shown them grace and favor and not treated them as their sins deserved. They are secure under God's care. In the same way, we are at home in God's city. We are secure in His care. We have come in the gate which is Jesus. The joy of the Lord is your strength. The joy comes from knowing the depth of your sin and the depth of His forgiveness.

John 10:7-10 - Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 14:6 - Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me

Are you saved? Do you know Him?

And one day we will be in his eternal city forever. Our names will be recorded in His book, we will hear and understand his voice, and we will feast.

Revelation 21:1-5 - Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Revelation 20:12-15 - And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another **book** was opened, which is the **book of life**. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ If anyone's name was not found written in the **book of life**, he was thrown into the lake **of fire**.

A proper understanding of God's law should cause mourning. But this morning, let God replace that mourning with joy as we realize that He has paid the penalty for our sins. The joy of the Lord is your strength!