

When was the last time you ventured into the book of Nehemiah? Have you ever ventured into the book of Nehemiah? Really? Then, if hearing a sermon from Nehemiah was on your bucket list, you're in the right place. The lesson for today's message is from Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was a Jew who served as cupbearer to the king of Persia. He had to sample everything the king ate or drank to make sure it wasn't poisoned. This was an important position, but you never knew for how long. Instead of meeting Nehemiah in a Persian palace, we meet him in the rundown city of Jerusalem. He's taken a sabbatical to head up a construction project back in his home town - rebuilding the city's walls.

Having completed the wall project and providing the people with physical security, he moves on to the next one - to strengthen their spiritual security. For this he would team up with Ezra, a scribe and priest of the Lord, who had worked in the area for the past 10 years.

Nehemiah designed a special stage and pulpit for this occasion. What was so special? For the first time in decades, God's people gathered together to hear the Word of God read. Many had never heard a single verse of Scripture read out loud.

When the people saw Ezra climb on the stage and into the pulpit and open the book, they did something special – they all stood up. Do you know how long they remained standing? They were so hungry and thirsty for God's Word that they stood the whole time Ezra read God's Word. **“Ezra read it aloud from daybreak till noon.”** They stood and listened as God's Word was read for 6 hours. Should we give it a try? If we started now, we would go until 4 this afternoon. (or 1 in the morning.) You know, it's not even about how long can you stand? It's how long can you pay attention? We can't even make it through a 30-minute show without constantly flipping channels.

Everyone there - the men, the women and the children old enough to understand - stood and

listened closely as Ezra read the Book of the Law. The **“Book of the Law”** is how the Bible describes the books written by Moses, the first 5 books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Ezra probably read sections from Exodus and Deuteronomy which describe the promises God made with his people, Israel.

Ezra was assisted in this work by two groups of men. One group stood beside him on the custom-built stage to demonstrate their support for Ezra and what he was doing. The other group stood among the people and assisted Ezra during this 6-hour Bible study. What did they do? Not exactly sure. Maybe they took turns with Ezra in reading. Maybe they reread and explained portions of the reading to smaller groups after Ezra read to the whole group. Whatever they did, they were teaching God's Word to God's people. They explained what was read so the people could grow in their knowledge of God and his Word; so they could grow in faith.

Can you imagine being part of a 6-hour Bible study without chairs, tables, study guides, your own Bible, or coffee? We know they were paying close attention to what they heard. We know that because the people reacted to what they heard ... with tears.

They cried when they realized how unfaithful they had been to the commands of God, the commands Ezra had been reading to them and the Levites had been explaining to them.

Is that your response when you hear God's law? Does your heart get sad when God's law brings you to the painful awareness of your sin? Let me ask you this. When you hear someone complain about their job and then find out the starting salary for someone who does that job, is your first thought, *“What are they complaining about?”*

Because if it is, then you've exposed your covetous heart of sin. Your heart lacks contentment with what you have. Instead of being happy for them, you're jealous of them. Is jealousy that bad of a

sin? It's not like clobbering your little sister, is it? Your jealousy may not have caused a bruise or a black eye, but it is sin. Any sin, every sin, is an insult to your heavenly Father.

He's the One who gives us our skills and our salary. He's the One who's made it clear that kind of salary is not what we need, nor would it be good for us. Instead, God wants us to trust that we already have everything we need. If there is something missing, he'll supply it at the right time.

The people of Nehemiah's day were heartbroken when confronted with their sins. That's how God wants us to feel about our sins too, no matter how insignificant our sins may seem to us. Cleaning your room may have completed one of your chores given to you by your parents, but if you didn't do it cheerfully ... God finds your lack of joy in your service to him and others no different than the Grafton pharmacist who destroyed all those precious vaccines on purpose by taking them out of the freezer and leaving them on the counter.

While God wants us to take our sins seriously, he doesn't want us to be all gloom and doom all the time. Listen to what Nehemiah said to the people who had tears running down their cheeks: **"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."**

Nehemiah urged the people to **"enjoy"** and to **"find joy."** But how could they celebrate when they had just heard about their sins and what they deserved because of them? You wouldn't feel like celebrating if you just found out that you hadn't paid enough taxes for the past 10 years and the government demanded full payment with interest in 30 days? It would be hard to have a happy new year with that kind of news hanging over your head.

But ... wouldn't you celebrate if someone paid that debt for you? That's exactly the point Nehemiah was making: **"Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."** How can God be happy with sinners? He isn't. But that's why he sent his Son. It gave God joy to send his only Son to pay for your sins. The debt that stood between you and

God has been paid in full. If God is happy with us, then we are happy. He is our strength and our reason for joy.

During those 6 morning hours, God's people had heard from God's Word the full force of the law. They were painfully aware of their sins. But they also heard from God's Word the sweet sound of the gospel and God of free and faithful love's design for them. Mercy and forgiveness dried up those sad tears and probably created some glad tears.

God's people did go home with joy that day. It wasn't because the marathon Bible study was over, but rather **they now understood the words that had been made known to them.**

One of the neatest ways that believers expressed their joy in the Lord back then is the same way we do it today, with a special meal. Our meals served here at church have a wonderful history all the way back to Bible times. Scripture often describes eternal life as a feast, a banquet. Our feasts on earth remind us of the best feast of all still to come in heaven.

Evidently, the previous day's 6-hour Bible study wasn't enough. They wanted more. That's the thing about God's Word. Once you get into it, it's hard to stop. So, for the next 9 straight days they came to hear Ezra read to them from God's Word. That might seem a little over the top. But here's God's take: Every bit of your spiritual growth comes only through a combination of the law with the heartbreaking knowledge of your sin; along with the gospel and the heartwarming knowledge of your full and free forgiveness.

That's what God does whenever and wherever we read or study his Word. Even if you don't enjoy reading, you can listen to God's Word on a CD, or download it on your phone, and listen to it on your way to work, or while you work out, or when you work at home.

It's a terrific way for you to grow your knowledge of the Bible and your dedication to the Lord. Now, aren't you glad you ventured into the book of Nehemiah? Take out your sharpie and cross that off your bucket list.