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NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

[PRAYER] Father, thank you for the many things that you've done, the Jesus stories that have taken place in our lives this week. Continue, Lord, to reveal yourself to us. Teach us how to be grateful and to see the things that we're thankful for that you do. One of the big things that we're thankful for is Jesus Christ who died for us and we want to thank you specifically for that. We also thank you for your word. We know, Lord, that when we open it we learn from you and so as we do that now, I ask that your Holy Spirit would be present, moving in and around the people here. You'd be touching us, touching our hearts. Indicate inside of our lives what you would have us to do next. Lord, we ask that you'd give us something that we can take away from here as we look at your word. In Jesus' name, amen.

As you prepare to think about Nehemiah 8 today, I want you to think about an analogy. Let me give you a picture. Imagine that your dad passed away and you went into the attic to clean out some stuff and you find a bunch of boxes and inside of those boxes are all these letters. As you look further you see that the letters are addressed to you. So you're eager to open them up. When you do, you read ideas from your dad that helps you know how to live up to the family name. In fact as you continue to read them, you learn more about your dad too because you're reading the letters and learn more about yourself and your own history. It's fascinating. So you're more inclined then (you have to take a break because there's so much to look at), you're eager and anticipating coming back to the same project again so that you can dig into the boxes and you can read more of these letters.

Now that is kind of a crude example I think or illustration of the way that we come to the Bible. The point of contact between my analogy and our analogy today in the passage has to do with anticipation. That when we come to the Bible we do so with eagerness and anticipation because God's word is not just a book of ideas, it's not just a book of quotes. It's not just a book of suggestions on how we should live our lives. It's a book about God. And when we read God's word, we hear God speak to us, we learn more about who He is, we learn more about ourselves and what He has for us. So when we come to the scriptures we do so with this great sense of anticipation and excitement.

I remember when I was a boy my dad would have devotions with us. He would hold the Bible in his hand. I've told you this story, but I'm going to keep telling it to those of you who've already heard it. He holds the Bible in his hand and he would say, "Are you ready? I don't know whether He's going to say something big or He's going to say something small, but He's about to speak." Wow. So even now when I open the Bible on my computer or on my phone or however I'm looking at it I have this sense of anticipation that God is going to speak to me. That anticipation

and that excitement is what drives me back to the word so that I can understand what God has to say.

Now at Calvary Chapel Living Hope we teach the Bible verse by verse. So we're going right through a passage of scripture right now. We're in the book of Nehemiah. We're in Nehemiah 8. You can look at it in your own Bible and follow along there. Or you can look at it in the passage that I have put up on the screen. I'm going to read it for you. And in honor of God's word and with anticipation, would you stand up as I read this passage.

Nehemiah 8:1-8 – At that time all the people gathered together in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could listen and understand (those are children, who could listen and understand). So Ezra read it aloud from daybreak until noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate, in front of the men and women and those who could understand. Those are the children who could understand.

And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for this occasion. At his right side stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, and at his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was standing above them all, and as he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted, all the people said, "Amen, Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites (now I'm going to read thirteen more names because it's thirteen different guys)—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law as they stood in their places. So they read from the Book of the Law of God, explaining it and giving insight, so that the people could understand what was being read.

They not only stood for the reading, but they stood for the sermon too. But I'm going to let you be seated.

Let me set the story for you and the picture of what's happening here. They gathered around the Water Gate in the big open area there in the big square that was present. And this event, as you see in verse 2, takes place on the first day of the seventh month. Now that was a feast day. In fact if we go back, if you were here last week I showed you the list of feasts. Let's just look at those real quick. This is the second page of the two-page document I showed you last week. Feast number five is the first one here. Trumpets. It's one day, the beginning of the seventh month, which is their new year. The importance of it is to express joy and thanksgiving to God. So this

is a special day. It's not just an ordinary day. This is New Year's Day. That's what I want you to imagine. New Year's Day. Everybody's getting up early. They're getting out there, it's before daybreak that they have to gather because at daybreak he starts reading. Maybe because then he could see or I don't know why he starts then, but he's going to start at daybreak.

So all the people gather. And they gathered at this gate in the big square. Now you can imagine the platform built for Ezra and these other guys to stand on. And behind him is the wall. A good kind of amphitheater, maybe a good echo that they would get for the sound to be transmitted. And it's daybreak. About this time of year, which is our September, the temperature in Jerusalem is 65-70 in the night as it's getting to be morning. So it's probably about that temperature. And as the sun comes up it's going to come up from the east behind Ezra as he's speaking and reading the word. As the sun comes up over the wall then people are going to be able to be warmed by the sun. The temperature of the day is probably going to get up to about 75 or 80 degrees in the heat of the day. So you're just imagining the picture there.

I want you to feel being in the presence of what's happening. People all sitting around having gathered early on this special day. They're sitting around and when Ezra goes to open the book...the scroll (it would be a scroll that he opens up) and he's going to read part of the Book of the Law. These are part of the first five books of the Bible. He's coming to the Law. It's all called the Law, but maybe he's coming to the part where he's talking about the Ten Commandments, he's talking about the covenant, he's talking to the people about who they are. He's reading the story to them about who they are and what God has for them.

Now you have to remember that these people hadn't seen a Bible, of course. They didn't have one on their own that they could carry around. Many of them couldn't even read. And they hadn't heard the Bible read for many, many years. So at this point when the Bible is read and they hear that the scrolls are being opened then everybody stands to their feet out of anticipation and out of honor for God's word.

Now as they're standing, notice the audience is defined for us. So it's the men and women and then the children who could understand what's going on. In our worship service we have a special program for children 9 and under. We send them out because they don't really understand for the most part what's going on. So we send them out to learn in their own class and they can understand on their own developmental level. The ages 10-14 stay in with us because they can understand for the most part, but often they have questions. So at the end of the sermon, you're going to see a slide pop up and 10-14 year olds will go out with a teacher who will further explain to them and answer their questions about what was said. We believe children 15 years and older can stay in with us. In fact I try to target sermons to that younger age so that you young people can hear what God has to say to you from the passage in God's word and the teaching that's presented.

Now as this scene is unfolding there are all these other men, twenty-six other guys. Ezra is up there reading it, but he's got thirteen guys on the platform in addition to him and then he's got thirteen other guys spread out among the people. The Bible tells us that their job is to share the message and explain it and help people understand it. I think this is one of the greatest pictures of

Bible teaching, worship, revival, however you want to see this, in the Bible. And so what we have is this picture of the scriptures being read and explained.

I just think this is the way teachings should take place in a church. Because what happens is when God's mind connects with the actions of man... So there's a big process that gets us to the actions of man. When it goes from God's mind to the actions of man, God's word is in the middle. So when the two come together, God's word touches our lives and then it starts to impact us and it impacts how we live and what we do. So there's this anticipation. They stand up, they're getting ready, they're excited about this, and they're ready to hear what God has to say. So it's read and explained and articulated so that people can catch it and it makes sense to them and they've got it.

Next week we're going to look at their response, which is also fascinating. What does God's word do when we read it? When we hear the teaching of God's word, what happens inside of us? When we hear what happens inside then God can do something in our lives. So that's next week.

But today I just want to talk about this sense of anticipation. My goal is for you that when you leave today you'll have a sense of anticipation for God's word. That you're not reading God's word out of a sense of duty. Although I think it's good to set up a schedule of regularly reading God's word. And if duty is how you get there, I'm okay with that. But the idea here is I want you to come to the Bible with a sense of anticipation that God wants to speak to you today. He wants to say something to you tomorrow. That as you open God's word and you read it, good things take place. In order to do that, I want to take you to some thoughts about the unleashing of the power of God in our lives.

I sent you a question this week by email and I asked you this question. How is God's power unleashed through His word? How does that take place? Or can we better unleash God's word in our lives? One of the answers that came back rather quickly, which was great, is this very sense (and it's the right answer I would suggest) that the way we get the power of God into our lives, into our actions is through faith. Faith and God's word together is what brings change in our lives.

Let me show you a scripture that just illustrates this. I underlined the portion about believing. This is a passage that Paul is speaking to the Thessalonians and he says to them: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God.* So there's this sense that we experience together. That we're not just reading another book. You could have a group like this to take turns reading poems or something or reading books, but that is not what God has designed for us. When we come together we read His word and we understand His word. Because it is the very word of God. So it creates this sense of anticipation, *which is indeed at work in you who believe.* Who is God's word at work in? *In those who believe.* There's this sense of faith that's tied to God's word that activates it, that turns it on, that releases or unleashes the power of God.

Let me show you another verse. This is from Hebrews where it says *we also have had the good news proclaimed to us.* So we're still talking about the scriptures, the message of the gospel, just

as they did. *But the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who believed.* You see if you can activate God's word in your heart, it's going to be through faith. Faith is what provides the unleashing of the power of God's word in your life.

Faith.

I'll show you another verse. Here's Jesus speaking to the Jews who had believed. Notice these are the ones who believed. Jesus said – *If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.* Notice who He's speaking to. *To the ones who believed.* See, there's something about faith that activates the power of God through His word.

What is it about this faith? What do we have faith in? Because certainly you must have doubts sometimes in your life? I wonder if the Bible is true. Or I have questions about whether this is applicable to our lives today. Or is the Bible really the word of God? Now please don't think you're the only one that's ever had any doubts. Doubts are common and God can handle all of our doubts. But here's what really helps us to understand this idea of faith because it's what we put our faith into that's very important. And notice I'm going to suggest that biblical faith is choosing to believe that something is true because someone is truthful. Our faith is in God's word certainly, but more importantly than that, our faith is in the God who wrote it, who sent it, who delivered it to our own hearts.

That's why 2 Timothy 1:12 Paul says these words to Timothy. He says – *That is why I am suffering as I am.* So in your struggle, in your challenges, in your storms, in your life you're experiencing challenges just like Paul was. And he says *that's why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom* (now just circle the word *whom* in your Bible) *I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.* It is who we believe in. We believe in the God and we have that personal relationship with God. And because of that personal relationship we are interested to know what He has to say. So we are very interested in knowing the God of the Bible, believing in Him and trusting in Him, and that happens through a commitment to Him. It also happens by watching Him work in our lives and experiencing His grace in our lives. When we understand that and we have that faith in Him then the scriptures have all the more power unleashed in our very lives.

So if we're going to look at the unleashing of the power of God through His word, then we're going to read it as they did in this passage. We're also going to believe it. But I also want to suggest that we need to declare it. We need to make a statement. We need to use the scriptures in our response to God.

Now sometimes you're just going to take the scriptures and you're going to pray them back to the Lord and you're going to say to the Lord something. When you're feeling like you're off track and you've lost your way, then you're coming to the Lord and you're saying – *One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life.* So we're praying that kind of thing back to the Lord. Paul says (and we can quote this verse to the Lord) – *Lord, all that I have that I count as gain I consider loss for the sake of Jesus Christ.* Or in Philippians it says another verse that we can bring to the Lord. *Lord, I know that you are going to bring to completion what you're doing in my life. You're bringing to*

completion the day of Christ, so, Lord, I know you're working. So we pray back scriptures to the Father.

There's sometimes we just need to make those statements as declarations for ourselves. And we say, "Lord, I just want to claim that promise in Jeremiah 29:11 that says – *I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you.* So we make those declarations in our own lives. And when we do the power of God is unleashed through His word.

Jesus modeled this in the area of temptation. So when you're experiencing a temptation the scriptures become this great tool to use to unleash the power of God. *The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God (then do this in the flesh, do this with your own power, not God's power. You can do this), tell these stones to become bread."* *Jesus answered, "It is written."* He's going to take the scriptures and He's going to use those to fight Satan's attacks.

I would encourage you if you're struggling in a particular area of your life, whatever that might be – you're trying to overcome a habit, develop a pattern – and you're tempted in a direction that you don't want, then take five or six Bible verse, memorize them so you can use them as Jesus does when He's confronted with temptation and He can respond.

We're unleashing the power of God in our lives by declaring it. We read it, we believe it, we declare it. And then one more thing we can do with God's word that unleashes His power is we act on it. It means we obey it. We do what it says. That requires faith. It often requires that we do something that is different than we're used to. Something that may feel a little bit uncomfortable. Something that is scary. But we do it because we want to unleash that power of God inside of our lives.

And James tells us that. He says – *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*

If we're going to unleash the power of God in our lives, it's going to transform me, my family, my community, my church, my nation, then we as individuals must put into practice the things that we're learning from God's word. That means you got to read it, believe it, declare it, and then do it. So as we're doing that, it unleashes the power of God in our lives and great things can happen in the midst of that. You know Jesus wanted to communicate this same idea to the disciples about putting God's word into practice. Putting these kingdom principles into practice.

So He tells a story. I want to look at this story that He told. But before I look at it, I want you to see who the verses are written about. It's *those who hear these words of mine and put them into practice. Now those who come and do* what I'm saying. Most of us I would suggest know more than we do. And if we could take what we know from God's word and put it into practice good things can happen. And notice it's also written about *those who hear the words of mine and do not put them into practice.*

Let's look at Jesus' parable for a moment. *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall,*

because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

I want to make some observations about this passage and this story that Jesus told. The first observation is this: We are all building a house. We are all builders. This applies to all of us. We're all builders and the activities that we engage in over the course of the day determine whether we're building a house on sand or we're building a house on rock. And how we do those, what we invest in in our lives, where we put our time in determines whether we're investing on a foundation on sand or a foundation on rock. So that's the first principle. We're all builders.

Second truth we see here is that everyone experiences storms. The wise man experiences storms; the foolish man experiences storms. We're all going to experience storms in our lives. They are not optional. They are going to come. Storms are coming.

The third thing I'd like to suggest is that the wise man believes in storms and he gets ready for them. The foolish man doesn't. "Ah it'll be fine. I'll be okay. Everything will work out," says the foolish man. But the wise man is the one who prepares in advance and does something about it.

And the fourth thing I'd like to suggest is that the work we do now to prepare for storms that are yet to come is to invest ourselves in the word of God. To do what the parable is suggesting to us and that is to put the words of God into practice in our lives. When we start to put them into practice, we might say, "Well I don't really need this right now," but we start doing that and it starts building inside of our hearts. The more we do, the more we work on that, the more we allow these things to take place in our lives and grow, then we're ready for the storms when they come. They are going to come.

I know some of you right now are in the middle of a storm. So you are learning on a fast track what it means to trust the Lord and to rely on Him. You're learning through a very real storm in your life what it means to plant your feet or build your foundation on the rock of Jesus Christ.

But maybe you're here today and you're doing okay. I'd just encourage you've got to know storms are coming. And if storms are coming, the most important thing we can do is to build a foundation on the Lord. How do we do that? The passage tells us how to do that. We're going to put into practice what God's word says. How are you going to put it into practice unless you know what it is. So we've got to read it, we've got to believe it, we declare it, and then we do it. And then when we do that it unleashes this power inside of our hearts.

Now this power that's unleashed inside of us is not just for us, but it's something we can share with others. There are a lot of people who are suffering in their own storms of life right now and they didn't prepare for them. So you can see their foundation is just being washed away. They are in trouble and they need a message. What is that message? That message is that Jesus Christ through His grace has come to save us. Those are the words. He saves us. He rescues us from our own foolishness and provides through His grace the opportunity for us then to plant ourselves on a firm foundation.

It is very true that some people do not experience God's grace in its fullest until they go through a storm. We've just got to realize that. Yes, we can prepare in advance by impropriating God's word in our lives, by applying it, by doing it. But there's sometimes we hit a storm that we just feel like we're not ready for. When that takes place, we're relying on the grace of God and the power of God in our lives to build those anchors into the rock. Sometimes it's the adversity that we experience in life that teaches us how to do that more.

I want to go back to Nehemiah and the passage towards the end...let's see it's in verse 6. Notice what they did after they read the scriptures. In verse 6 it says – *Then Ezra blessed the LORD. Baruch* is the word there. He blessed the Lord. That's an Old Testament word. *Baruch Yahweh, Gadol Elohim. Bless Yahweh, the great God.*

You see in the Old Testament it was easy for the Israelite people for whatever reason to go after other gods. And as they went off to the other gods then their lives would have all kinds of consequences. Bad things would happen in their lives. It's true for us too. You start worshipping other gods in your life then bad things happen. So God's drawing them back now to Himself. And these words are really powerful words. They mean something more to them than they would just anybody saying them because the word Yahweh is God's first name. Bless Yahweh. Bless God. And it says this is the great God. Of all the gods that are out there, this is the great one.

Two of my daughters are adopted and they are a treasure. Over the years giving them gifts have been really special because they're so grateful for the gifts that they receive. I remember one Father's Day card that I got and the Father's Day card said "to the best dad ever." Now that means something else when it's an adopted daughter saying that to her dad. In other words you're the best of all that I've known, all the best that are out there, but you're the best. There's something special. Those words mean a lot. They have kind of a secondary meaning. Any of us could say to our dads, "Hey, you're the best dad ever." But when an adopted daughter says that, whoa that is great!

So you look at those words and Ezra is saying bless Yahweh, the great god. Gadol. Big God. Bless Him. Drawing the people's hearts back. This is an example of revival in the scriptures. As they came into contact with the Bible it changed the way they lived. It changed their lives. So what did they do? They lifted their hands and *all the people said, "Amen!"*

So there are times when we're going through a worship service and I'll say "and all God's people said amen." This is where it comes from. Just so you know, this is where it comes from. There's this message where the power of God's word and our worship service is centered around the teaching of God's word. Because that's where revival takes place, that's where our lives are changed. It's when the word of God meshes with the heart of man and then moves in the actions of man that change takes place in our lives. So all God's people said amen.

Alright. Put your hands out. I know we're not a church that does a lot of this. Put your hands out, that's what they did. Put your hands out like this. It says they lifted their hands and all the people said amen, amen. Okay one more time. And all God's people said amen, amen.

Alright. So what we're talking about here is the power of God. Remember that God's word is powerful, but it sits over there until it's activated. And you can activate it and unleash it when you read it, when you believe it, when you declare it, and when you act on it.

Alright? Let's stand together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we are grateful for your word. Lord, teach us to love it more. Give us such an anticipation that you're going to speak to us that we are eager to open it up, eager to read it, and believe it, and declare it, and act on it. Father, we ask that you'd teach us. Teach us how to live today and tomorrow. Grow us, Father, in a powerful way. Thank you for the privilege we have to read your word together and to enjoy it and to learn from it. So we ask that you'd work in our lives this week. Teach us. In Jesus' name, amen.