

## **Applying the Book**

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer  
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No. 4:           The Best of Books  
Scripture:       Nehemiah 8

A year ago at our Future Directions Meetings we made a decision to build The Center. It will provide much needed greeting, teaching and recreation space for our guests, our congregation and our community.

In October the construction began and The Center is now taking shape. The good news is that The Center is on time and under budget. Soon we will be able to take you on a tour. Until then here is a video to show you the progress that is being made.

### **SHOW VIDEO OF THE CENTER**

<http://autumnridgechurch.org/center/the-center-videos.html#c4254>

By May The Center will be completed.

So now what should we do when we reach the end of a building project? How do we celebrate this achievement in a God glorifying way?

That was the challenge facing Nehemiah when he rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. His ambition was not simply to reconstruct the city's defenses but to revitalize a spiritual community. He understood that it is the people not the walls that make a city. Just as it is the saints and not the sanctuary that make a church.

Nehemiah chapter 8 describes what God's people did once the walls were up. This passage provides a model for us on how we can dedicate ourselves and our buildings.

So please turn to Nehemiah chapter 8 in your Bible and take out your message outline as we look at the practical subject of **APPLYING THE BOOK**.

Applying the Bible to our life is both the delight and duty of every disciple so it is hard to imagine anything more relevant to our faith.

The first thing we see is that once the walls were completed **THEY BROUGHT OUT THE BOOK OF THE LAW**

**"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.**

**So on the first day of the seventh month** (that is October 8, 444 BC. This was their New Year's Day and so it is appropriate for us as we begin a new year in the life of our church.)

**Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.” (v 1-2)**

Now there were a lot of ways God’s people might have celebrated rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

There could have been a military parade because the walls kept them safe from their enemies. There could have been inspiring speeches from Nehemiah and some of the contractors. There could have been a community party.

But there wasn’t. Instead the people gathered by the Water Gate and they asked Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law. Notice this demand for the Bible was driven by the laity. It wasn’t imposed by those at the top. Rather it was the desire of the ordinary people who were present.

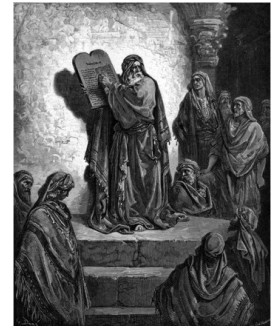


This Book of the Law was probably the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. It contained the Ten Commandments and all the instructions for living a godly life. Notice what they did with the book.

**They read all of it.**

**“Ezra 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.” (v 3)**

Ezra stood on a pulpit and the architecture of the surrounding buildings would have projected his voice out to the people.



On this special day in the life of Israel they turned to what was most precious to them, to what was at the very heart of their faith. They read the scriptures from early in the morning for six hours until midday.

They didn’t just do it once. The end of the chapter informs us, **“Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God.” (v 18)**

That is seven days of scripture reading. What did the people think of this?

**They respected it.**

**“All the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.” (v 3)**

This was the voice of God so it deserved their complete attention. They focused upon it. They hung on every word.

Not only that but when **“Ezra opened the book . . . the people all stood up.” (v 5)**

Their reverence for God’s was so great they could not remain seated, so they all rose to their feet.

This is still the practice in synagogues today and in some churches. When the gospel is read the congregation stands and faces the Bible.

We do not worship the book but we adore the God of the book. Calvin made the point that "we owe to scripture the same reverence that we owe to God since it has its source in him."

Next **they responded to it.**

**"All the people lifted their hands and responded 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." (v 6)**

The reading of the Law wasn't some dry academic exercise.

It touched their heart and they shouted 'Amen, let it be so.'

It softened their souls so they prostrated themselves in worship. The word of the Lord had given them a glimpse of God which influenced what they said with their mouths and did with their bodies.

I hope you have had that experience where the reading of scripture has such a profound effect on you that you want to cry out or make a physical gesture that reflects the feelings of your heart.

Next **THEY APPLIED GOD'S WORD TO THEIR SITUATION.**

We read, **"The Levites instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.**

**They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that people could understand what was being read." (v 7-8)**

Here is what is going on. Ezra is reading from the Book of the Law while the 13 Levites named in the passage applied its message to the people in their own situation.

These were Jews by birth but not by language or culture.

They had come from Babylon to Jerusalem.

They had brought with them a Chaldean outlook and lifestyle.

So they heard the Bible through Babylonian ears.

There was a communication breakdown and that is why they needed the word expounded.

It is quite likely that the Hebrew language had undergone some changes since the days when Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

The everyday conversational Hebrew of the people would be different from ancient Hebrew.

The reason we need newer translations of the Bible is not because the Bible changes but because our language changes.

Suppose you had to use John Wycliffe's version of the Bible which is the oldest version in English.

How much of this passage would you understand?

**"alle ye that traueilen & ben chargid come to me & I schal fulfille you, take ye my yok on you & lerne ye of me for I am mylde and meke in herte: and ye schulen finde rest to youre soulis/for my yok is softe & my charge liyt." (Matthew 11:28-30)**

Wycliffe's translation is just 630 years old. But between Moses' writing of the law and Ezra's reading of the law a thousand years have elapsed.

We can imagine these Levites moving among the crowd and answering questions or approaching people who look puzzled or maybe gathering a small group around them and explaining what the scripture passage means for them now that they have returned to Jerusalem.

The relevant application of scripture is essential.  
The Bible is not a book which simply describes life in the world of antiquity. It has a message for today that is vibrant and up to date.

Application is an essential part of Bible study.  
It is not enough just to read a passage.  
We need to reflect on it, to meditate on it, to ask questions of the text and apply it to our own situation.  
We can of course do this on our own but it is particularly helpful to do this in the company of others.  
This is the benefit of a small group Bible study.

The ministry of these 13 Levites demonstrates the importance of spiritual leadership. The crowd at the Water Gate were fortunate to have such men guiding them.

It is the same in the church of Jesus Christ.  
We are richly blessed by those who serve on our Elder Board.  
At our Future Directions meetings we will elect four more Elders. Our spiritual leaders serve a three year term and then they must leave the Board for a minimum of a year.  
So each year four Elders go off and four more come on.

Much of what our Elders do is behind the scenes but I can tell you this church would not be what it is without them moving around our congregation and serving the people of God.

I depend on them. And I am especially grateful for the leadership that Roger Stahl has given in the past year.  
He has been a tremendous encouragement to me and to the other members of the pastoral team. Give thanks for your Elders, pray for them and support them in every way you can.

There are two important applications the spiritual leaders of Israel gave to the people.  
First, **they were joyful.**

**"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 . . . Nehemiah said, 'Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'** (v 9-10)

Now God's word does have a convicting power.  
This is why the people were weeping.

But scripture not only condemns sin it proclaims a remedy.  
That is why the Levites urged the congregations not to mourn.

Within 10 days of this gathering at the Water Gate there will be the Day of Atonement. Then the sacrifice was offered. The scapegoat would carry all their sins to a solitary place. The people were given this physical sign as well as a verbal assurance that they would be clean from all their sins. That is why the Levites told the people that this was a day for gladness not grief.



We learn here why we are to strive to be people of joy.  
For the joy of the Lord leads to strength.  
That word strength was used to describe a well protected stronghold. When we are in trouble God's people know the place where they will be safe. It is the Lord himself.  
When we turn to him, we receive his joy.  
He gives us the power to keep going.

Some of us are spiritually weak because we are despondent.  
Perhaps we are overwhelmed by our circumstances or the state of the world.  
But when we read the word of God we discover that God is in charge. He is in control of the world. He is the God of all hope and therefore we can be people of all joy.  
Matthew Henry liked to say, "Holy joy will be oil to the wheels of our obedience."

Not only were they joyful **they were generous.**

**"Nehemiah said, 'Go in and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared . . . 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.'" (v 10-12)**

When we spend time with God we become like him.  
We can not read about a generous God and remain mean and tightfisted.  
The scriptures teach us that God has given us more than we need in order that we can help those who have less than they need.

The Puritan preacher William Bridge described the Bible as a looking glass.  
Using the looking glass of Scripture we see three things.  
First we see the material glass, second we see the reflection of our own image and third we see the things around us.  
As we see the glass itself we are reminded that scripture is God's testimony to his own nature.  
Then we also see ourselves and our own dirty face.  
But we also see the people around us in all their need.

A billion people will go to bed hungry tonight.  
Those who read scripture cannot ignore the cry of the destitute. James teaches us that the Bible's most searching test is not what we know but what we do about it.  
God wants us to be in Luther's words, "a Christ to our neighbor."

The Israelites had plenty of food for themselves but they remembered those who had nothing. It was inappropriate for them to be stuffing themselves while others were starving.

Generosity is a measure of our spiritual health.  
That is why I want to commend you as a congregation.  
Last year you supported youth mission teams.  
You gave to the Benevolent Fund.  
You provided for over 50 missionaries and Christian agencies.

You donated to Next Chapter and CareFest.  
Most amazing of all, you gave over a million dollars to our Sharing Hope Campaign.  
We launched this in the middle of an economic downturn.

When my daughter Emily read my letter to the congregation about Sharing Hope at the beginning of last year she called from college and said, "Daddy are you mad, don't you know there is a recession going on?"  
Yet you have given generously and so far we haven't had to borrow any money from our construction loan for the building of The Center.

Here is an encouraging statistic for you to take in.  
If we include our gifts to the offerings and to Sharing Hope our giving to God in 2010 grew by 36 percent compared to our giving in 2009.

That is magnificent. It is evidence of God's grace.  
You are investing in God's kingdom.  
That is an investment that can never be lost whatever happens to the stock market. It brings eternal dividends.

#### Then **THEY SPREAD GOD'S WORD**

As Ezra read the book of the Law God's people discovered that they should be celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles.

They had been neglecting this practice.  
This meant they had to build shelters out of branches.  
They did this on the flat roofs of their homes and even in the city square and then lived in them.

The building of these booths reminded the Israelites of God's faithfulness to them in the past and the need to trust him in the present.

Sometimes we read Scripture and we discover we should be engaged in a practice we had either forgotten or we had never thought of before. What should we do?  
If we want to be obedient disciples we get on with it.

This was a lesson the Israelites could not keep to themselves so they decided, **"They should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem." (v 15)**

God's word is not to be kept a secret but shared with others because it reveals a Redeemer who provides forgiveness, salvation and eternal life.

I rejoice that spreading God's word is a passion of this church. It is why Global Outreach represents 17 percent of our church budget this year.

It is why our first Bold Initiative is helping build the Compassion Evangelical Hospital in Guinea.

Guinea is a country in West Africa with virtually no decent medical care. Last year you gave \$150,000 to build a surgical wing for the hospital. It is taking shape slowly because each brick has to be made by hand.



The hospital has to be equipped and we are seeking to do that too. Just last weekend we sent another container of medical supplies from Rochester to Guinea.

It included an anesthesia machine, beds, and an EKG machine. Surgical and dental instruments, and IV supplies.

We thank those who spent hours collecting the equipment and packing it.



All this flows out of having the word of God at the center of our life together for we have discovered that scripture is sweeter than honey to our taste. It is a lamp to our feet. It is the joy of our heart and it is more valuable than gold. We long for it as a person short of oxygen gasps for breath.

When the walls of Jerusalem were completed the Israelites read God's word to remind themselves of their purpose in life.

On this weekend when we have our annual church meeting it is good for us to remind ourselves why we are here.

The purpose of Autumn Ridge is: **LOVING GOD, SERVING PEOPLE.**

Now we didn't select that mission statement just because it sounds nice. It wasn't the result of a focus group coming up with a nifty idea. It is drawn straight from scripture.

When Jesus was asked what is the most important commandment he replied,

**"The most important one is this. . . Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."**  
(Mark 12: 29-31)

Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy, the very book Ezra was reading to the people.

Loving God and serving people explains why we do what we do.

We love God so we love his word.

We love God so we are committed to excellence.

God is the best so we want to do the best.

We love God so we want to worship him in spirit and truth.

We love God so we want to develop as disciples of Jesus.

We serve people because Jesus did.

We minister to the needy because Jesus did.

We go into the world because Jesus told us to.

We gather in community because that is how we can encourage one another.

That is what Autumn Ridge Church is all about and if that appeals to you we encourage you to join us as we seek to combat the work of Satan in the world and push back the effects of the fall and in their place establish the kingdom of God.

God made this world perfect and one day he is going to restore it to perfection and He is using his church to accomplish his will.