

# The Surprising Supremacy of Preaching

*Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

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**Bible Text:** Nehemiah 9:1  
**Preached on:** Sunday, July 18, 2021

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Turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah 9. Nehemiah 9. We're turning to the book of Nehemiah after quite a break. Our last sermon in Nehemiah was May 2, two- and one-half months ago. I have a way of when I take a break, I do take it longer than I intend to when we start out. It is our purpose, in the way we approach the ministry of the Word here at Providence, is we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture. And one of our core commitments is to expository preaching. And expository preaching is essentially, one of the key elements of it is, the consecutive preaching of the Bible through the Word of God, book by book, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse. And we believe this is the way the Lord wants to shepherd his people. This is how he intends to care for our souls. And there is something powerful about allowing the text to dictate the message.

And so, that's one of the beauties of expository preaching. And we find that we are coming today to the passage that actually, coming back to it, that is really the watershed moment in the history of God's people that elevates preaching to the primary place in the life of God's people. And redemptive history, in the history of salvation, this moment in time 445 B.C. the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah is a time that God puts preaching in the supreme place. In fact, the title of the message is "The Surprising Supremacy of Preaching." The surprising supremacy of preaching.

I say surprising, because it's, you know, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, "Through the foolishness of preaching, God saves those who believe." The foolishness of preaching. And in that context in 1 Corinthians 1, he's talking about the wisdom of this world contrasted with the wisdom of God. And he is pointing out that the wisdom of God appears to be foolishness to the world. And he goes on to say that the foolishness of God is the wiser than the wisdom of men. And in the wisdom of God, the foolishness of God is that he has ordained preaching. Really is something if you step back and think about it.

The fact that we gather together and the primary portion of our sermon by far is the preaching of the Word. We stand and we listen to a brother expound the Word of God. That's actually, if you stop and think about it, there is something odd about that. And so, it's good to step back from that and try to understand where do we get this? Is this something we've invented or made up for ourselves? I mean, it certainly bears questioning and examining.

And we come to the passage of Scripture that really does begin to lay down this pattern that we see then continued through the New Testament. Because we come to a moment in time in the history of God's people where the central focus of the people of God is being transferred from the temple and the sacrificial system. It's not being removed. Please understand. There is still continuing sacrifices. It's a key part of what the book of Ezra and Nehemiah is about is the rebuilding of the temple. But there is nevertheless, a sense in which now the Word, the preaching of the Word of God, is being elevated to equal to or above the temple worship system.

And this is the moment it is happening in the expositional preaching of Ezra in Nehemiah 8 and then the impact of it that's carrying on into Nehemiah 9 and 10. Because this revival that is taking place is a revival that is birthed through the preaching of God's Word. That starts in Nehemiah 8 but continues to reverberate through the rest of the book of Nehemiah. And it's significant, because Ezra and Nehemiah, remember we are expositing these two books. Those of you that haven't been with us, we believe Ezra and Nehemiah are essentially one Old Testament book. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible, it is just that way. It's one book.

In the English Bible, following the Greek translations, the Septuagint, they made it two. But we believe it is supposed to be one. And as we work through it, we see how connected it is. And we're going to see it again today. The connections are really striking. It's one book. And the purpose of it has been to show us how God is restoring his people after the exile. And so, there are three returns that are discussed in the book of Ezra/Nehemiah.

The first six chapters of the book Ezra Nehemiah, actually properly Ezra 1-6, concerns the first return. The people of God of the Israel have been exiled to Babylon, one thousand miles away, and they are now going to be brought back by God to the land of Israel to Jerusalem. And the first thing they do when they come back, their first charge, the first group of returnees, because what happens is, they are sent away to exile, but they come back in three different returns. Three different installments, as it were. The first installment, or return, happens in the first six chapters of Ezra. It happens in 538-536 B.C. It's led by a man named Zerubbabel, and the purpose of this first return is to go back and rebuild the temple.

The temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and now they are to rebuild it, and they, after they rebuild it, I mean they actually, the first thing they do is rebuild the altar, and they reengaged the sacrificial system. For seventy years, or more than fifty years, there had been no sacrifices offered. Now, they reestablish the sacrificial system. This is the first return. The first installment of the return from exile.

The second installment happens about ninety years after the first in, I'm sorry, eighty years after the first, 458 B.C. Remember B.C. you're counting down as you go through history. 538, 458, eighty years later. The second return is under a man named Ezra, and it's a much smaller group of people. And they have a distinct purpose when they come

back. And that is to restore kind of the city, the broader city, rebuild the city, and to reinstitute the teaching of God's Word. And that is in chapter 7 to 10 of Ezra. The first return, the first six chapters. The second return is the next four chapters. And then the third return happens thirteen years after the second return from 458 to 445 B.C. under a man named Nehemiah, and the purpose of the third return is to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, to reestablish the boundaries, to set apart the people of God, to protect all that has already happened, the worship, the word, and now the walls.

And so, you have these three returns, and so, the book is about God's people being brought back and being reestablished in the land. So, you see how it all fits together as one book. It's how they are brought back from exile and reestablished as his people in the land in three installments. God is miraculously working in all three. And so, that's the overall thrust of the book. And what we see as we go through it, is that, and as I was mentioning, one of the significant things about this is, we're going to see today, that preaching is elevated.

Now, what's happening is the people of God are being told how are you to carry on now that you're back in the land. You live in confusing times. They lived in 445 B.C. under the reign of the Persians, under a Persian hegemony. The Persians ruled over Israel. Israel was not a free nation. That we'll see in chapter 9, they call themselves slaves, because they still were subject completely to the Persians. They didn't live fully as slaves as we might conceive, but they saw themselves as not free as God's people had been free.

And so, they're living with the confusion of that, the challenge of that. To be God's people restored to the land, brought back to the land, and yet not fully what we were. They were expecting to return to the former glory of David and Solomon. But that would not happen. They were brought back instead to a lesser, outwardly a lesser, glory. Under the Persian hegemony trying to live for God in the midst of hostile culture around them. People who opposed the worship of God. And so, they got to make sense of their lives. How do you live in those kinds of times? And you see the amazing relevance of this book Ezra/Nehemiah for us today. As we see the culture becoming increasingly anti-God, antibiblical. This book lays out for us how do you live in times where you are under the domination of forces hostile to the gospel?

The good news is don't be panicked. It's been this way before. God's people have walked through times just like we are in today. And if things get worse, we will know it's just like people have been in before. God is on the throne. And so, this passage, this book, speaks to us and calls us to that. And one of the really powerful things about it is it's one of the last books written in the Old Testament. Very possibly, it's likely either the last book or the next to last book. Malachi is roughly a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. So, he may have written this a little after his book, a little after they did. But what you have here with Malachi, and Ezra/Nehemiah is you have the last words, as it were, from God to the people of God before the intertestamental period.

They're about to go into a period for the first time when they will not have prophets speaking to them. Since God raised up Moses, for a thousand years they've had prophets.

It's interesting. You know, Moses went to Egypt in 1445 B.C. Delivered them. They went into the Promised Land in 1405 B.C. Here we are in 445 B.C., one thousand years after Moses said, "Let my people go." The people have returned to the land, but now they are about to hear God's last word. They're about to go into a time of silence. There will be no more prophets.

From 1445 B.C. to 445 B.C. there has basically been an unbroken succession of prophets. Moses gave way to Joshua. Joshua to Samuel etc. all the way down to Nathan and others. Then Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, all the way down to Malachi, and Ezra/Nehemiah. And now, God is going to stop giving his Bible. And for four hundred years, there will be silence from God. No prophets. A famine for the Word of God. And so, the last words that God gives are really instructive when you know you're about to enter, now they didn't fully understand that they were about to, but they, once they realized that they should have clung to these books with a special tenacity, because here are the last words about how you are to carry yourselves and conduct yourselves in the trying and confusing times that lie ahead.

This is the purpose of the book Ezra/Nehemiah. To help them prepare. And so, these three returns are showing them how they're to live for God. And so, in a sense, in the big picture as you step back from it. You see that they're to make sure worship is at the center. They're to rebuild the temple. Worship is to remain a key priority. They're to celebrate the feasts of the Lord. They're to go to Jerusalem to worship God in his temple when they are called to do that. And that's regularly. Three times a year at least they are to be at Jerusalem. The three pilgrimage feasts for Passover, for Pentecost, for the Feast of Booths. They are to do that. And they're also to reestablish the Word of God, and then the walls, picture call to holiness. So, they're to be about worship. They're to be about the Word. And they're called to be holy, separate from the people, which is what you're going to see as we go from this chapter on to the end.

Again, the emphasis on separation from the nations around them. We're to be in the world, but not of the world. We're not to be like the world. We're not to love the world. And God was showing the people of Israel in difficult times when you have an oppressive system, you must pursue holiness. Now, that said, then it comes back to the issue of the preaching of the Word and the surprising supremacy of preaching, the title of the message this morning. What we see is that the Lord gives us kind of an astonishing, we haven't seen anything like this in all of the Old Testament. Where they gathered for an extended preaching service like this where we're given this much detail about what was said. There were times where the Word of God was read. People responded, "Yes."

But here we have really a kind of a picture of a new type of ministry of the Word. And again, to show you how revolutionary this was, even Jews, unbelieving Jews, Jews who have not accepted Christ as Messiah, Jews who are practicing Judaism, one of the things that stands out about Ezra's ministry is they see him as a second Moses. Ezra's ministry was of such profound impact that he was seen as a second Moses. Why? Because he brought the Law of God. What did Moses do? Moses, yeah, he led the Passover. What did he do? He gave them the Torah, the Law of God. He's the one who God used to give

his whole revelation, those first five books, the Torah, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

And now, what Ezra does is he, in a sense, re-gives them. He restores to them the Law of God. And so, he is a second Moses. And in this, what he does even beyond that is he sets a pattern of preaching the Word of God that is new and distinct. Connected, yes, with the previous ministry of the Word. It's not brand new, but it's taking it to a new level, and to a new place, and a new level of priority. His proclamation of the Word. So that what will happen after this point, as we go into the intertestamental period, you see a movement of Israel from a people that are centered completely on the temple to now being people who are centered on the temple and also on the synagogue. You've heard the word synagogue, Jewish synagogue, where they, it's like their church. The word means a gathering.

And this starts out and flows out of Ezra's ministry here. The people, what happens at this moment, is the Jews, in a sense, cross a watershed. They cross into a new era in which now they become the people of the book. They were in a sense the people of the book, but to a new level they become the people of the book through the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah. And this is why the synagogue becomes relevant. Now, on the Lord's Day, they gather together to hear the proclamation of the Word. This is going to continue all the way up until Christ. And so, Jesus, when he would minister in various areas, he would go into the synagogue, and he would preach.

When Paul took the gospel across the New Testament world, the Greco-Roman world, the first thing he did when he would go into a new city was go to the synagogue on the Sabbath and proclaim Christ. Preach the Old Testament Scriptures and show them who Jesus was. Because that pattern had been set flowing out of Ezra/Nehemiah. So, this watershed happened. And these chapters really are the watershed, chapters 8 to 10. And we technically, we went over chapter 8 in three messages, and I refer you back to those. If you have the opportunity to look at those online, you can. Because May 2 was the last of the last two Sundays of April, and May 2 we were in Ezra 8.

We're in Ezra 9 technically, but I felt like we needed to tie together some of the stuff I really didn't emphasize enough from Ezra 8. And this really is this sense of the supreme place of preaching and this transition that happened where the Lord shows us that when he wants his people to gather together and to place themselves under, together under the Word of God. This is the purposes in worship. This is the way God shepherds his people to live in a hostile world is they gather together and place themselves under the Word of God. This is what is happening in these chapters. And this will be the pattern we're going to see that continues on throughout the New Testament and throughout church history among faithful churches.

This is why the Word of God is the primary point. You know, we don't have sixty minutes of singing and fifteen minutes of preaching. We never err on that side at all of course at Providence. We might, you know, we always need to consider and be reforming our worship, but in reality, the main thing is the preaching of the Word. And this is from this passage and from the example of the New Testament.

Now, with that said, what I want to do is I want to read the first eight verses of chapter 8 after I read 9 verse 1. We're going to read chapter 9 verse 1, and we're going to get into chapter 9 more fully next week, because in chapter 9 is the effect, the effects, of the preaching that happened in chapter 8. Chapter 9 is the spiritual revival that flowed out of the preaching in chapter 8. So, I want us to, as we reengage into this book, to get back in and immerse ourselves in it. Let's start with verse 1 of chapter 9. And then we'll read chapter 8. In fact, we'll read the first twelve verses of chapter 8. Now, chapter 9 verse 1.

"Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them." There is a gathering together of the people. They have been convicted of their sins. There is a great spirit of repentance upon the people. This is revival happening right here. What's interesting though is it's the twenty-fourth day of the month, and this revival, this conviction, began to happen twenty-three days before on the first day of the seventh month. And before I read that, I want to kind of just tell you what's going to happen. They gather together in the seventh month on the first day for the preaching of the Word. They preach the Word for three or four hours, and they exposit the Word, explaining the sense of the Word, and the people are under such great conviction they are weeping, and mourning, and wailing. Think about that.

You go to a church service that lasts for several hours, and everyone is under conviction and is mourning over their sin so much they can't even, the groans that are coming up from the heart. And the priest silenced the people and said, "No, be quiet. Do not do this. Today is not to be a day of mourning." Which is really, there is a lot here. God basically saying, "Look, when you come into my presence, there is a twofold reality when you come into my presence."

When you really come into the presence of God, you really see God as he is. Holy, righteous, pure. You will also see your sin. You can't escape it. you will see yourself as vile, and filthy, and wicked. These two things go together. More knowledge of God means more knowledge of self. And what that does is breaks the heart of those whom God is really working in.

And so, they're mourning. They're wailing. But God in his wisdom, and grace, and mercy directs the people that are leading them to say, "No, no mourning. No wailing. Not yet. Today is a day of joy. Go home and celebrate, and then we're going to celebrate the Feast of Booths, and it's going to be a time of great rejoicing, and then after all of that, we will pick back up where God found you today, and the wickedness of our hearts we will confess."

And what's beautiful about that is the Lord basically is saying, "Look, I want you to understand. I understand for you to come to me as sinners is a frightening and terrifying reality. And if you understand it correctly, you will understand that. But I want you to know that the kind of God that I am, I will deal with your sin. I will cleanse you. But I want you to know that in coming to me you will find great joy." And he says, "I don't want you to mourn today, because I want you to understand very clearly that when you

come to God, the first thing that will happen is joy. I mean, you will come into his presence. You will experience mourning. You will experience grief over your sin. But if you stay with him, you will come through that grief into greater joy than you could ever imagine. And I want you to understand that very clearly, emphatically, enough that it will make you able to persevere through the pain, because joy is coming in the morning.”

This is what’s going on in this passage. This is the larger flow of this passage. He is teaching us this. And so, he is telling us this is the way that we are to live. So, look at chapter 8 now. With that, you understand where we are going. Watch how this unfolds in chapter 8. And we’re going back in time to the first day of the seventh month. Nehemiah 8:1.

“And all the people gathered as one person at the public square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it before the public square which was in front of the Water Gate, from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.”

Now, he’s going to tell us that’s kind of a general statement. He is reading, we’re going to see, he’s not just reading. It’s not just Scripture reading. It’s preaching. He’s going to explain it, because he’s going to come back and tell us in detail in the next few verses what he was just telling us. He said, for four hours basically they read from the book of the Law. Now, he’s going to tell you what was actually happening. Verse 4.

“Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose.” So, he’s standing at a podium. “And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiyah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left. Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen!’ while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites explained the Law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from the Law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.”

That’s expository preaching. They read and they explained to give the sense. So, when they were reading for those four hours, this is what was happening. They were reading, and they were expositing and explaining the Word. And look what happens now. Verse 9.

“Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, ‘Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.’ All the people went away to eat, drink, to send portions, and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.”

Let’s pray.

*Father, we ask, as we continue in your Word, that you would continue to open the eyes of our hearts to see and understand. Lord, we thank you that your Word is living and active. It is powerful. It pierces to dividing joints and marrow, soul and spirits, a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart, because it is the sword of the Spirit. The Spirit wields it. So, we ask you Holy Spirit to wield it in our hearts and to make us people of the book for the glory of our Savior. We pray in his name.*

So, the supremacy, the surprising supremacy of preaching. Preaching in a sense is elevated to be equal or above the temple system. Definitely raised to that level. And we’ll see that in just a moment. What I want to talk about. There are three points this morning we want to cover. And the first is the place of preaching. The second is the pattern for preaching. And the third is the purpose of preaching. The place, the pattern, and the purpose. The first thing, the place of preaching.

This is really getting at this supreme place that God gives to preaching. And it is surprising. We see here as a response to the preaching of the Word. And what’s happening in chapter 9 verse 1 when they show up with fasting, sackcloth, and dirt upon them, is they are now coming still under conviction that started twenty-three days ago in the preaching of the Word. The second Moses, Ezra, has given them the Law of God, and God’s Law is radically impacting them.

One of the things that we see about the place of preaching, that it had this exalted place is seen when we look at this interesting connection that is happening. We talked about this a few months ago, but I want to come back to it, because it’s so important to see this, and it’s elusive. You have to kind of stay with me to understand what’s going on. I am going to try to tell you what’s happening, and then we’re going to look at it, okay?

Ezra/Nehemiah, remember you have the three returns talked about. First return is to rebuild the temple. It’s the first six chapters of Ezra. They come back, and they rebuild the temple, this large group of people. The second return is in chapter 7-10, and that’s when Ezra comes back with the Law of God, and they try to order the city of Jerusalem

accordingly. The third return is under Nehemiah 1-13, and it's about rebuilding the wall. They actually finished rebuilding the wall in Nehemiah 6, and then something really strange happens in Nehemiah 7. In Nehemiah 7, turn back over a page, Nehemiah 7. When they had just finished the wall, the wall has been completed in fifty-two days according to chapter 6. They're getting ready to think about dedicating the wall, and Nehemiah 7:5. This is Nehemiah talking.

“Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the other people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first, in which I found the following record.” And what he does from verse 6 all the way through verse 73 of Nehemiah 7 is basically copy down the record, the genealogical record, that was already in this book in Ezra 2. Do you get that? He takes a chapter and just like, I want to say he xeroxes it, but so many of you wouldn't know what I am talking about. Right? How many of you know what xeroxing is? Some of us do. Kinko's, copies, all that kind of thing, right? Anyway, so, he basically, he writes down again a copy. In his new book he writes down a copy of the chapter that he has already written.

That's got to be important! Why would you do that? If it were me, I would just say, “See chapter 2.” I mean, writing is hard. And paper is expensive. Especially then! I mean, paper was hugely expensive. So, he had to have a really good reason for that! And what his basic reason is he is connecting the three returns. He is saying, “What's happening now is the fulfillment of what was happening then. In 538-536, probably about 536 B.C. that they're actually rebuilding the altar in chapter 2 and 3 of Ezra on the first return.”

Remember, they are rebuilding the temple. The first thing they do is they rebuild the altar. Then they start rebuilding the temple around the altar, okay? So, that's happening then. Now, though, the wall is built, and he says, “Let me go back and tell you about all the people that were here that rebuilt the temple, because the same thing is happening now. What God started then is happening now. God is restoring his people to be all that they were created to be.”

And he uses some wording that if you're not watching it's astonishing. Like in chapter, look at, we're still in Nehemiah 7. I know I get turned around myself in this. I know it's got to be hard if I'm getting confused. The old saying is “Mist in the pulpit is fog in the pew.” So, pray against mist and fog. But look at the wording. I mentioned he gives this recopying for the most part of Ezra 2 is now Nehemiah 7. He comes to the end of it in 7:73, and he says this, “Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel lived in their cities. And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities.”

And 8, chapter 8:1. “And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate.” Now, turn over to Ezra 2. I mean Ezra 2. And listen to this. Ezra 2:70. “Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.” Yeah, so he is telling us the same thing still. “Now when the seventh month came,” chapter 3 verse 1,

“and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.”

When you turn back over to Nehemiah, hold your finger there on Nehemiah and Ezra 3. Turn over to Nehemiah 8. When he says, “And all the men gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate.” You might think he is still quoting chapter 2 and 3 of Ezra, right? He’s been quoting it all the way, and he says almost exactly the same thing here as well. But now he is saying, “No, I am not talking about then. I am talking about now.” In 4, I am sorry, in 536 B.C. all the people in Ezra 3 gathered together as one man in Jerusalem. And what they did then was they rebuilt the altar. And they started offering sacrifices again. That’s Ezra 3.

In Nehemiah 8, all the men after that connection, look at it, he’s basically saying, “Go back and look at Ezra 2. Go back and look at that! Now see the connection!” Because Nehemiah 8:1 he is saying the same way God sovereignly gather all the people together. Then, about ninety years ago to the day, he is doing it again. He is gathering all the people together again as one man. It’s a supernatural spirit upon the people. They’re not just coming together as they normally would. There is something profound about it in the same way there was ninety years ago to the same day. And he points out it’s the same day of the year. It’s the first day of the seventh month in 536 B.C. It’s the first day of the seventh month in 445 B.C.

God that was doing that is doing this. He is rebuilding his people. And now, how does he rebuild his people? Not by rebuilding the temple, but by elevating the preaching of the Word. What God has been doing, he is doing, and now he is changing focus slightly in emphasis, and he is now prioritizing the preaching of the Word of God. It’s always been important, but not it takes the primary focus. This is why the pulpit is in the center of the church. Catholic church, what’s in the center? The table. The primary position in the Catholic church is the table, because that’s where they make the offering. They make the offering the sacrifice of Christ, which is an unbiblical and ungodly understanding of the Lord’s Supper. They’re mistaken. They believe Jesus is being re-sacrificed on the altar every time the priest prays over the elements, and they make that the center. If they make the sacrifice the center, but they missed, they don’t read their Bibles very well, because God has already put that aside. And he said, “No, the center is the proclamation of the Word.”

And so, the pulpit is to be the center. And it’s not the preacher that is in the center. It’s the Word that is in the center. If I were to drop dead right now, God forbid, somebody else come up here, call 911, get me taken care of, and somebody else come up here and start keep preaching the Word, because we’re here to hear the Word of God. And it’s the Word that is the central. So, he’s making this clear. The place of the Word is central. Now, think about it. The timing, and this careful wording that he shows that this is now an incredibly significant moment in history. But beyond that, the emphasis, the place of preaching, is shown in the time given to it.

8:3. Nehemiah, back to Nehemiah 8:3. “And he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate, from early morning until midday.” Some folks think this was three hours. Some think it was four. It was at least a three-hour sermon. Wow. You know, people that come to our church are kind of amazed. You know like, you listen to John MacArthur or other people in our tradition. We tend to preach closer to an hour. Some people think that’s, “How do you do that?” How do you sit and listen to a sermon for an hour?” And sometimes, after you’ve been here, you probably think the same thing. “How did I possibly listen to that for an hour?”

But they were there for three hours! And chapter 9 verse 3 when they come together, which we looked at in verse 1, and they’re now going to begin to really repent and deal with what they heard before, fasting, sackcloth, and dirt upon them. They come to stand and confess their sins. But while they, this is how they are actually going to carry it out. It’s not enough. The sermon you heard three weeks ago, or three- and one-half weeks ago, is not enough. Look at verse 3.

“While they stood in their place, they read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.” So, they heard the Word for three more hours. It says the preaching of the Word is primary. It takes time! We see this in the New Testament. The preaching of the Word is to be primary. Look with me at the pastoral epistle. Helpful to note this interesting providence of God. He gives us three of Paul’s letters which are referred to as pastoral epistles. They had that name, because these three letters of Paul, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, are written to, not to churches, but to pastors.

Think about it. All of his other letters, almost all of them, are written to churches, right? The Romans, the Corinthians, the Philippians, the Ephesians. But here, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, he’s writing to men who are shepherding the church. And so, it’s really instructive. This shows you how as leaders, and pastors, and shepherds, and elders, we need to shepherd the church. And what we see in it, is the primacy of preaching. Look with me at Paul’s first letter to Timothy. Timothy is pastoring the church of Ephesus, and Paul is telling him how to conduct his ministry.

And he says, in verse 6, in pointing out these things to the brethren, it’s 1 Timothy 4:6, “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.” Sound doctrine. Look at verse 11 now. Skip down to verse 11. Here he is saying, “Timothy, what you need to do is ‘prescribe and teach these things. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and teaching.’ Until I come, Timothy, this is what you’re to be about. Read the Word and preach the Word.”

Look with me at 2 Timothy. He writes from another letter a few years later. And he tells him about how bad things are going to get in the last days in chapter 3. He says, chapter 3 verse 1, “But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come.” 2 Timothy 3:1.

“For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, slanderers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” What a catalog! He says, “In the midst of this kind of time, what are you to do?” Verse 10. “Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance.” He’s basically saying, “Okay, look, this is how bad things are going to be. You’ve seen how I have conducted myself. Follow that example.”

He says, “You’re going to experience persecution,” verse 11 and 12. “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” But what are you to do? You’re to understand verse 13. “But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” The world is going to hell in a hand basket, and you can’t stop it. But what are you to do? Verse 14. “You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them.” What are you to continue in?

Verse 15. “And that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” You continue in the Word. This Word is sufficient to equip every single person that you will minister to. It will equip them for every good work that God is going to call them to.

Every challenge that they will face, the Word will enable them to be sufficient and adequate to that as God intends. It doesn’t mean you’re not always going to get, it’s not going to work out the way you want it to. No, of course not. But it will enable you to be faithful. The Word will show you what following Jesus looks like in this confusing circumstance in which you find yourself. Paul is saying to Timothy, “Timothy, just preach the Word. Just hold on to your Bible and preach your Bible.” Look what he says next in chapter 4 verse 1.

Coming out of that flow he says, in chapter 4 verse 1, look at the weightiness of what he says, “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, and they will turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

“Keep your eye on the ball, Timothy. You stay focused with what I have called you to do, which God has called me to do. I have modeled for you, no matter how bad the world gets, you preach the Word. That’s what the people of God need.” He shows the same thing to Titus. Not quite with the forcefulness that Timothy gets, but the same message.

Titus 2 chapter 1 of this third pastoral epistle. He has actually talked about how bad things are going to be for him if you go back to chapter 1 verse 10. “For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers.” He’s talking about false teachers, people who are going to oppose you in the church. “Those of the circumcision, men who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of dishonest gain.”

He said, “Look, things are going to be happening in the church. You’re not just having opposition from without. You will have opposition from within. Timothy was as well. 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. Dealing with opposition from within the church. But what do you do? After he concludes this section in verse 16 of chapter 1, Titus 1, “They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed. But as for you.” Do you see that? “I am telling you how bad it’s going to be even within the church, but don’t be preoccupied with that, ‘but as for you, proclaim the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.’ You speak the Word. You teach sound doctrine.”

I love that phrase sound doctrine. It occurs again and again in the pastoral epistles. Sound doctrine is healthy doctrine. The word in Greek *hygiaino*, from which the adjective is taken means to be healthy. And so, doctrine, true doctrine, biblical truth, promotes spiritual health and well-being. So, if you want to keep your flock safe and secure, you want to keep them healthy, and vibrant, and powerful, and growing, and effective in their ministry in the world, teach sound doctrine.

He goes on down at the end of this chapter. He basically tells him in these next verses, “Hey, listen. Apply the Word to older men. You teach older men. You teach older women. You teach younger men. You teach younger women. You teach bondslaves. And you teach the gospel.” In verse 15 of chapter 2 he sums up, and he says this, “These things speak and exhort, and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”

“You, young Titus, young Timothy, you’re not to be timid. You’re not to look at yourself, and see your weakness, and be timid, because you are weak. But when you speak the Word of God, you are speaking with the authority of God. Don’t apologize for it. That’s not humility. That is crass arrogance.” People want to talk about humility and act like you have to say that humility is acknowledging we just can’t know truth.

No, that’s a blasphemous lie. That’s what the culture believes. But God lets us know the truth. And when we know the truth, now listen, we all can be messed up, and we have to work at understanding the truth. Yes, we are problems, but the Spirit of God when he shows us from the Word of God the truth of God, we are not to apologize for it or hedge around it. We’re to proclaim it. We all need to be that way. But especially the men who lead the flock. The place of preaching is to be primary. It’s the place of the speaking and teaching of the Word is to be central in worship, exemplified in Ezra/Nehemiah, and illustrated in these pastoral epistles.

But the Word of God is to be primary in your individual life. We're to preach the Word to ourselves every day. Be reading the Word of God and applying it. How much are you doing of that? God intends his Word to have the primary place in every one of his children's lives. What are we doing to minister the Word to one another and our families? We squander opportunities. How many opportunities we squander. In our fellowship, in our conversations, when we get together.

We're supposed to love one another, and enjoy one another, and laugh together, yes, yes, yes. We're to have fun. We're to talk about things, but we need to be intentional about trying when we are together to move things as often as we can to the Word of God. Something from the Scripture that we can share. Feed one another.

Colossians 3:16. "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another." That verse "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," that is a plural you. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you, as a group, richly. Not you individually. We tend to think of it individualistically, don't we? As Americans especially. It means let the Word of God, I am to meditate on the Word of God. No, the Bible talks about that other places. That's not what Colossians 3:16 is saying.

Colossians 3:16 is saying, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you plural richly." How does it happen? Not with your meditation. Like I said, the Bible covers that again and again and again, but other places. Colossians 3:16 is saying let the Word of Christ dwell in you when you are teaching and admonishing one another. You're speaking the truth to one another. That's what Colossians 3:16 is saying. So, the Word is to have. And so, it's preaching we're doing to one another. We're all called to minister the Word. That's the place of preaching.

Secondly, the pattern for preaching. The pattern for preaching. First, it's two subpoints here. The message and the man. Back in Nehemiah chapter 8. The pattern for preaching. He exhibits a pattern for us for what preaching is. The message. Essentially, he reads the Word, and he explains the Word. And the Spirit is applying the Word. And I think that we can help think about those things when we are effectively preaching and teaching. And there probably was some of that that was being done. We're not given the sermons. We're just told the basic content.

So, to read the Word, explain the Word, apply the Word. That's what essentially what preaching, that's the pattern that Ezra has his message that we see here. The message that he and the others are preaching. It's a group of men preaching. Ezra is taking the lead, but others are preaching with him in this preaching service. I said earlier it takes time. Three or four hours each time. Not saying that I'm advocating for that. Don't worry. I'm not thinking that we need to have three- or four-hour services. I think the sermons are long enough as it is. Maybe too long now. We don't need to go longer.

But it says that we need to be cultivating a hunger for more of the Word, not less. And that takes work. And it's hard when you're coming from a church that's not, or you're not used to hearing preaching. It's hard. I understand that. Just pray for grace and do the best

you can. If you have pain in your back, and you've got to get up and move around, do what you got to do. Please don't worry about those things.

But it's not just the message itself, but the man. Look at, Ezra is a pattern for preachers. Turn back over to Ezra 7 for a minute and look at the kind of man this man was who became a second Moses, who inaugurates the ministry of expository preaching. In Ezra 7, actually when you read verse 9 it helps to set up verse 10. He's explaining how he led the people from Babylon on this second return in 458 B.C. and how they were blessed by God in a mighty way and made the journey without a guard in four months.

He says, "For on the first day of the first month he began to go up," Ezra 7:9. "For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him." Now, why was the good hand of God upon him? That's the next verse. For Ezra had set his heart to do three things. "To study the Law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." To study it, to live it, and to proclaim it. Ezra was a man who studied hard the Word of God. And then he worked hard to live what he had studied. And then he worked hard to clearly teach what he had lived. This is the pattern. We're to explain the Word. But we are to follow this kind of life that seeks to live the Word as well.

And so, the point, the pattern for preaching is aimed at careful study. The word study here in Ezra 7:10 pictures like an investigation. Diligent effort. That right preaching is careful study. It's not just coming to the Bible and filling it with your ideas. It's letting the Bible speak itself. It's leading out the meaning. That's what expository means. Is to lead out the meaning. Exegesis. That's what the word exegesis means. To lead out the meaning that is in the text. Not to superimpose upon the text what we want to talk about.

In fact, that's really the definition of expository preaching is the text controls the sermon. The text controls the sermon. It's not the preacher thinking about needs that he wants to address or hobby horses he wants to talk about. But the text, when he comes to a text, the diligent desire is to see what is the mind of God in this passage by careful analysis of the words in the sentences, and the relationships of the sentences and the paragraphs to understand what does God have for his people at the moment in time that he inspired this, and how does that relate to us today when we correctly understand the Scripture.

So, accuracy is so, is the one vital thing. 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul, we quoted from 2 Timothy earlier, saw the pastoral epistles. Preach the Word was the exhortation. In chapter 2 verse 15, Paul tells Timothy, "Study to show yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed." You can be a workman who needs to be ashamed. When you preach the Word, and you don't preach it accurately, you should be ashamed. He says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed." One who is approved. "Accurately handling the word of truth." Literally, cutting it straight. That's what we're called to do.

So, expository preaching is to cut it straight. To let the text control the sermon. The main point of the sermon is the main point of the text. The supporting points of the sermon find their origin in the text. They flow out of the text. I like what Voddie Baucham says about this when he'll have a particularly convicting point. You may have heard him, if you've heard him preach. "I don't write the mail. I just deliver it."

That's really what the goal of the preacher is. To deliver the mail. Not to change the mail. Not to write some personal notes on the mail. But to deliver the mail. Now, it does get shaped by human being coming through a human being. But the primary focus is deliver what God has put down. Deliver it with care and precision to God's people. This is how God wants to care for his people. He wants his people to be shaped by the Word of God. And so, we gather each week to be under the Word of God for the Lord to then shape us by his Word to make us love Christ more. To make us stand in awe of God more. To see who he is.

The purpose of preaching, the third point real quickly, and we'll wrap up with this, is to show people who God is truly. To know God and to know yourself. I'll talk about this more next time. We're going to come back and deal with that more next week. I can't shortchange that. But like we were saying earlier. When you come into the presence of God, you come to know yourself. And so, all of Scripture is aimed at revealing God to us. To see him as he truly is. We have wrong beliefs about God. We have way too low a view of God. And we have way too high a view of self.

And so, the Scripture comes to recalibrate the soul of the believer. It comes to recalibrate the soul of an unbeliever, because an unbeliever is dead and in the dark, and they can't see, and they need to be made alive. And that happens through the Word of God. But the Word of God continues to sanctify the believer by continuing to bring the believer into a closer, more accurate knowledge of God, and as you know God more, you see yourself with greater clarity.

And so, there is this dual reality happening in the proclamation of the Word, and as we study the Word, as we meditate on the Word, the dual reality is, you see the glory of God and the beauty of God, and you see the ugliness of yourself. So, you mourn, and you rejoice. You mourn that you're such a wretch, and you rejoice that Jesus is such a glorious savior. And the more that you more mourn, the more that you rejoice. The deeper your mourning goes, the greater your rejoicing goes.

Where sin abounds, there does grace much more abound. And your heart is enraptured by a God who loves you in spite of yourself. And a God who is even through the difficulties of life, the complexities of life, leading you with his Word, shepherding you as a shepherd lovingly shepherds his sheep. Sometimes walking in front of you. Sometimes coming behind you and whacking you with his Word. But always loving you and seeking that you would know him. That's what we're called to. Isn't the Lord good?

Let's go to him in prayer.

*Our Father, how grateful we are for your ways, and your Word, and your incredible kindness. We thank you that you are a God who abounds in loving kindness and mercy. But you are holy. And you will punish all evil and all sin. And so, that's why we know we must run to Christ, and we must exhort every person we have opportunity to talk to, to run to Christ. Because if they are not in Christ, they will suffer under your wrath for their sins what they deserve. And Lord, we will suffer what we deserve unless we are in Christ. When we come to Christ, we come to the wonder that he has taken all of our punishment. He has fulfilled justice by being made sin for us by bearing our sins in his own body on the cross, by being treated as if he had lived our wretched lives. He has taken our sin out of the way having nailed it to the cross. And then he gives us his perfect righteousness. Makes us as if we had never sinned. Makes us as if we had always obeyed. And that's how you see us. And yet, Lord, as we live as believers in a fallen world, we still struggle. We still wrestle with an old nature. We see too much worldliness, too much sin, wretched behavior, attitudes. And yet, we see there again the glory and sufficiency of Jesus in his offering, his sacrifice, his righteousness that is given to us as a gift. And Lord, then we come to know that you are a loving shepherd who will discipline your sons and daughters, your sheep. But you do so in love. So, God, continue your work in our hearts. Continue your work in our lives. Help us to seize the moment and make ourselves people of the book. More today than yesterday. For the glory of Christ, we pray in his name, Amen.*