

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 8:1-12

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“Getting Our Bearings”

Donald Miller, in his book *Searching for God Knows What*, speaks for some of us when he writes: “You would think some of the writers of the Bible would have gone to a writers’ seminar. Instead, they tell a lot of stories and account for a lot of history and write down a lot of poems and recite a great deal of boring numbers, and then conclude with creepy hallucinations that explain the future, in which we slip into outfits and fight the giant frog people. And all of this with virtually no charts and graphs, still...I like the Bible.”

There’s something about God’s Word that draws us.

In this eighth chapter, the people in this Nehemiah story are drawn to the Word

- The wall is built, the story shifts
- It was the first day of the seventh month (verse 1)
 - Some still remembered Leviticus 23:24; on the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest
 - A day to assemble and hear God’s Word (Deuteronomy 31:11)
 - *It was dedicated as a time uniquely poised for God’s presence*
- So the people gathered in the square, AND GOD MET THEM
- How did that happen?
 - For I think most of us would like God to meet us

Here’s when God meets us

1) WHEN WE COME WITH DESIRE (verse 1)

- “They told”
 - I wonder if Nehemiah wrote this and underlined it in his journal
“*THEY TOLD!*”
 - This was their idea
 - This was not Word imposed upon them by designated leaders
 - But desire that said, we need a word from God

Application: You and I can come to the Word lots of ways

- Out of habit, out of mere daily discipline, out of guilt
- Out of self centeredness, to find proof texts to justify our pre-conceived notions
- Or we can come out of desire, longing
 - Which we should, we must

- “Absolutely nothing of greatness is ever accomplished without desire” - Eldridge

- Nothing of depth is ever heard without desire

- I Peter 2:2 tells us to desire the word like milk

- Meaning, internalize the word until it becomes part of every cell of your body
- It's then that God meets us

God meets us...

2) WHEN WE COME WITH EARS (verse 3)

- They came to listen
 - Literally, “their ears were towards the book”
 - In part because most were not readers; theirs was an oral tradition
 - The Word was not readily available
 - Today we have the word on software, in magazine form, Reader's Digest version, NIV, TNIV, KJ, NKJ, ASV, NASB, LT, NLT, ESV, and eventually NESV
 - I have more Bibles than I know what to do with
 - Such was not their world, only the priest and a scroll
 - But we should not miss the point, they came to hear
 - Which is a habit many of us have not acquired
 - We may have read, but that does not mean we have listened?

Illustration - The prince of Grenada, an heir to the Spanish throne, was sentenced to life in solitary confinement in Madrid's ancient prison. It was dreadful and dreary, but he was allowed one book - the Bible.

- So he read it for the 33 years he sat in prison
 - Hundreds of times
- When he finally died, they found notes scribbled in the stone
- It went like this:
 - Psalm 118:8 is the middle verse of the Bible
 - Ezra 7:21 contains all the letters of the alphabet
 - Esther 8:9 is the longest verse in this book
 - No word or name is found having more than 6 syllables

- With a distancing eye, he spent his whole life reading words, but never heard God speak
- Never attuned himself to hear God's gentle whisper
- What a waste!

- For some of us, it may be little different
- The goal is not speed reading, but careful listening
- A process that is simple but takes enormous intent (White)
 - Beginning with silence, for silence is the condition for listening
 - Our problem is that we have too little of it
 - Silence comes visiting and finds most of us occupied with noise and hurry
 - Ipods and cell phones
 - There was time only doctors wore pagers and only presidents carried phones
 - Now we're all that important (Taylor)
 - Our prayers are punctuated with, "Hear us O God"
 - But few are saying, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

God meets us...

3) WHEN WE COME WITH REVERENCE (verses 5-6)

- Its opening brought the people to their feet
- The people stood
- The people bowed down
- The atmosphere was charged, expectation was in the air
- Not that they were worshipping a book
 - But in the reading, they anticipated God would speak
 - And the long famine would be over
 - A famine not of bread or thirst for water but of hearing the words of God (Amos 8:11-12)
- Maybe we have lost something of this reverence
 - Measured not so much by our posture, whether we stand every Sunday for the reading
 - But measured by our own anticipation, that God will speak through His word
 - With words that can change a course
 - Like dynamite that can explode old habits, blast away base fixations (Sweet)
 - Like energy that can release enough power to bring new life, save a marriage, shove lust to the back shelf
 - Like a compass, can point us to Jesus
 - Like bread, can satisfy our deepest hungers, satisfy the soul more than anything the world can offer (Matthew 4:4)
 - Like a key, its truth can set us free (John 8:32)

- When we come to it out of fear, God meets us

God meets us...

4) WHEN WE COME WITH MINDS TO GET IT (verse 8)

- When we take the time to discern, understand, move beyond mere reading
- For the word is deep, and our souls are shallow
- There is a certain irony: the word can be readily grasped by an open heart, yet it has a depth that transcends our greatest intellect
- All the exegesis in the world just grasps the surface of its surface
- Yet, when we take the time to break it apart, God meets us

So how do we know when God meets us?

Here's what happens when God meets us in His Word (verse 9)

1) HEARTS ARE PIERCED

- It is as if they woke up after a long sleep, lulled by a darkness that kept them from the light of God's word
- And suddenly, God's voice awakened them to a world in which one finds the Lordship of God
- Like Adam and Eve, they were suddenly made aware of their nakedness
 - The words disturbed, and for good reason
 - A) They were made aware of WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN had they been faithful to hear
 - B) They were made aware of what THEY HAD BECOME because they did not
 - Their roots had withered
 - They yielded no fruit
 - There was famine in the land
 - Disregarding God and His word has its price
 - "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6)
 - Without a compass, they veered off into pagan practices
 - Their sins were "higher than their heads" (Ezra 9:6)
 - Sins that had led to their captivity, to pillage and humiliation
- THEY HAD BEEN DELIVERED FROM EGYPT, AND BECAUSE OF THEIR LIFE CHOICES, THEY WERE BACK IN EGYPT

C) They were made aware of THE DISTANCE BETWEEN GOD'S WORD AND THEIR OWN LIFESTYLES

- And so they wept (verse 9)
- For this is the nature of Word
 - It is like a sword that goes deep, in order to expose sin (Hebrews 4:13)

Illustration - One thinks of Josiah who, after years of living life apart from God's word was encountered with the Word after it had been found in the temple

- When it was read, he tore his robes and wept in God's presence (2 Kings 22:11)
- As Israel now wept

How do we know when God meets us? Something else happens...

2) SOULS ARE HEALED

- The voice that wounds, WOUNDS TO HEAL!
- Lives experience grace
- Relationships are restored, starting with God
- Hence, the admonition to move beyond mourning (verse 9)
- Go celebrate God's mercy
- For such joy is literally a "mountain fortress"
- A protection against guilt and condemnation

APPLICATION - Maybe our response to Word is not so pronounced

- Maybe we cannot think of a recent time our experience with Word has led to either deep mourning or profound joy
 - We might say, "I tend to keep my emotions inside"
 - Or, "This was Israel, who was a lot more sinful"
- When maybe it has everything to do with our approach
 - Have I come out of desire?
 - Have I come to hear?
 - Have I come out of reverence?
 - Have I come to get it?
 - Or have I come simply to get information; analyze moral memos
 - Look for life applications
 - Look for messages where texts have been reduced to formulas
 - Sit under pastors who see God's word as little more than a collection of passages to be scientifically dissected, inductively sliced, and distributed to rational minds sitting in the pews, complete with application points
- And all the while miss the Spirit's deeper intention - to pierce the heart...heal the soul

In 1956, Billy Graham preached at the funeral of Dawson Trotman
- Who died while rescuing a swimmer

He made this statement: "Here was a man who touched more lives for Christ than anyone I've known."

Trotman was no saint in his earlier years

- Drifted, drank heavily
- Arrested
- But then he started meeting with a spiritual community
 - Where he heard God's word
 - And decided to start memorizing it
 - And those words eventually led him to Jesus

- For the rest of his life, he devoted himself to absorbing God's word, listening for God's voice
 - Eventually starting a ministry called Navigators
 - Which has probably influenced as many people as any ministry that has existed

What role has the Word in your life?