

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Worship Series		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	5		Mason Depew
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The Reading of the Law

Introduction: Each week in our worship we read the Law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments and Christ's teaching about the two greatest commandments. This practice is well-established in the Reformed tradition, but we must not do it simply because it is traditional. We must understand *why* it is so important to our order of worship, so that we can appreciate it better each Sunday, and explain it to our children as well as visitors. In this day and age, facing the realities of sin and guilt may be more unpopular than ever before. In our time of superficial positivity and affirmation-at-all-costs, it seems like such a big downer to reflect seriously on our transgressions and iniquities. Yet, as this text shows, when God's people really *understand* the reading of the Law and the confession of our sins, they lead us to a deeper, richer *joy*, instead of grief. In order to see this, we must of course take time to carefully understand the setting and purpose of this ceremony from Nehemiah 8.

1. Verses 1-2 - The Setting of the Ceremony

- a. Verse 1 – The whole people of Israel wanted not only to gather for worship, but specifically to hear Ezra read the Law of Moses to them.
 - i. The phrase “as one man” is the same as in Ezra 3:1. These moments of single-minded unity are noteworthy because they are so rare in the history of Israel!¹ A key reason for their unity here is undoubtedly the Exile, which was still in their recent past, and the difficult continuing work of rebuilding Jerusalem. Reminders of their forefather's sins, as well as reminders of how difficult it will be to regain their past glory, are always in front of them.
 - ii. Why did they gather in the square before the Water Gate, rather than in the courts of the Temple? It is almost certainly so that as many people as possible, even those who were ritually unclean, could hear the Law and know where they stand. This would also be the gate facing the stream of Gihon, from where Jerusalem at that time got most of its water. This was likely to signal that the Word of God is the chief source of spiritual life for God's people.
 - iii. The text mentions that Ezra is a scribe, and later, a priest. This means he was both extremely well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures and qualified to lead worship.²
- b. Verse 2 - Why did they gather on the first day of the seventh month? That would be the Feast of Trumpets (known to modern Jews as Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year), which God commanded them to observe with a day of rest, a memorial proclaimed with a

¹ “There was a mood of rare responsiveness, shown not only in the people's flocking to Jerusalem *as one man* (just as their forefathers had gathered after the Return: Ezra 3:1), but in their call for Ezra to read out the Scripture to them. Although this was not a sudden impulse - the platform was ready for him - it was clearly a general desire, and in that sense spontaneous, not a formality imposed by the leadership.” - Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 104.

² Ezra 7:1-6 gives his qualifications in more detail, and even says he was descended from Aaron the chief priest himself.

blast of trumpets, in a holy assembly.³ This festival is one of the least well-known in the Jewish calendar (to Christians, at least), but a few points are worth noting.

- i. This day of rest and assembly would be on *the first day of the week, Sunday*, as opposed to the regular Saturday sabbath. This is because the Jewish calendar was lunar, and therefore each month is always exactly four weeks long, so how the days of the week line up doesn't vary from year to year.
- ii. The trumpets lead many Jews to associate this holiday with God's kingship over all creation. The idea is that it celebrates the completion of his kingdom and ruling over it in might and majesty. The fact that he wants sinners in his court at all, as such a great king, is reason for rejoicing.
- iii. When ancient Jewish translators translated the "assembly" in this verse into Greek, they used the word *ekklesia*, the New Testament word for church. This is an important reminder of the continuity between God's Old and New Testament people gathering for worship.

2. Verses 3-8 - The Ceremony Unfolds

- a. Verse 3 - Note how long the people listened carefully to the Law being read: from early morning until midday would be about six hours! We do not, of course, have to read the Law for as long as they did in our worship. But we ought to seek to be as attentive as they were, since it is the true Word of God.
- b. Verse 4 - It is not clear what the thirteen men standing around Ezra on the platform were there to do, exactly, or how they were different from the thirteen who are named later, in verse 7. The most likely theory is that they were there to read and explain different parts of the Law assigned to them, as it would be exhausting for Ezra alone to teach continuously for hours and hours.⁴
- c. Verses 5-6 - The posture of the people, standing with their heads bowed, signifies both reverence and humility. This is highly appropriate, since the Exile is only a few generations behind them. The people are taking the posture you would expect from lowly servants who are seeking the forgiveness of their master.
- d. Verses 7-8 - The people needed help to understand the Law. This may be partly because they were no longer as used to Hebrew, and partly just because around a thousand years had passed since the time of Moses. Regardless, the model here is clear: ministers of God's Word need to prioritize clarity when communicating. Their chief responsibility is not to impress with lofty rhetoric, but to help God's people understand his revelations to them.

3. Verses 9-12 - Response to the Law

- a. The people, understandably distressed to hear how poorly they measure up to the Law of God, weep and grieve over their sin. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites, however, all tell those assembled there to *rejoice* and *celebrate* rather than mourn.
 - i. How does this make sense? Shouldn't the Jews be deeply grieved by their and their forefathers' sins that led them to the Exile? The only reasons they are told to celebrate in the text itself is because "This day is holy to the LORD your God" (verse 9) and "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (verse 10).

³ Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1-6.

⁴ "It is not clear exactly how these groups operated, but we may surmise that those on the platform successively read out portions of the law (as, in the synagogue, seven or more readers might share this task on the sabbath), and that the thirteen, or more, of verse 7 moved among the congregation in the intervals between these readings, making sure that they were understood." - Kidner, 105.

- ii. To understand this, we must understand the purpose of all the Old Testament sabbaths, around which their whole calendar revolved. The Sabbath was not meant to be associated with an oppressive list of arbitrary rules, like hoops to jump through. The key idea of the Sabbath, from the very beginning in Genesis 2:2-3, is *rest*, undeniably.
 - iii. The rest that the Sabbath promises, however, is not only physical rest from hard labor, but also real relief from everything to do with living in this fallen world. This is why Noah's father named him Noah, meaning "rest." It was a prophecy that Noah would bring relief from the misery of living in the violent world of Cain's offspring.⁵ It is also why Hebrews 4 interprets the Sabbath rest as heavenly: although we have a foretaste of it now, our ultimate, perfect rest will only come when we see Christ himself.⁶
 - iv. This explains why Christ later said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."⁷ The Sabbath was always meant to be a great gift, symbolizing the spiritual rejuvenation of God's people as they enjoy peace and fellowship with him. Just like you appreciate sleep after a long day of hard work, you learn to appreciate spiritual rest when you are really fighting spiritual warfare against your flesh, the world, and the Devil.
- b. The reason the people should rejoice, therefore, is that despite all the sins they have just been made well aware of, these holy days show that *God is not finished with them*. He is still maintaining his covenant and giving them real spiritual rest from their sins as they are forgiven and worship him together.
- i. In verse 10, Nehemiah makes clear that their celebration ought to include generosity to their poorer brothers, who have no resources to celebrate the holiday. This is consistent with his character earlier in the book, especially Nehemiah 5:1-13. More importantly, it is a fitting response to the generosity of God, from which they have all benefitted. Therefore they actually *enjoy* giving these portions in verse 12, because it reminds them of how much they have been given by God.
 - ii. In their context, they would see this through the restoration of the Temple and the animal sacrifices that go along with it. The Day of Atonement, with the biggest sacrifices of the year, would be only nine days after the Feast of Trumpets. The fulfilment of this for us, of course, is the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross. It is because of his shed blood that we can rejoice after confessing our sins. This is why we have the Assurance of Pardon in our order of worship, after we have heard the Law and prayed our corporate confession. Like the Jews, we too rejoice shortly after reading the Law, but we have *an even better reason!* We see the real reason our sins are forgiven, where they saw only types and shadows.⁸
 - iii. Notice that in the next section, 8:13-18, the people hold the festival of booths for the first time since the days of *Joshua*. Not even Israel's greatest kings, David or

⁵ "Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief[fn] from our work and from the painful toil of our hands." - Genesis 5:29

⁶ "For if Joshua had given them rest, God[fn] would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." - Hebrews 4:8-10

⁷ Mark 2:27

⁸ "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ... And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." - Hebrews 10:1-4; 11-14

Solomon, had done this. The people seem to be genuinely grateful and delighting in these festivals as powerful reminders of God's goodness to them. This also makes the experience of God's gracious provision for their forefathers in the wilderness fresh in their minds for their confession.

- c. Of course the reading of the Law like this calls for a confession of sin to follow. You can read their full confession of sin in the next chapter, Nehemiah 9, which takes place 23 days later. This confession is appropriately detailed, and similar in many ways to Daniel's confession in Daniel 9, just before the end of the Exile.
 - i. Interestingly, this confession starts with recounting God's original generosity to their forefathers through Abraham first, and then through Moses in the Exile. This may seem strange as a part of a prayer of confession, but its purpose is to further emphasize the gaping chasm between God's goodness and his people's sin.⁹ This is why it is appropriate to offer some praise or thanksgiving before we confess our sins in worship. We need to remember how great God is in order to accurately see how disgraceful our sin is.
 - ii. They make absolutely no excuse for their sins as a nation and paint the contrast between themselves and their God as black and white as can be: "Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them" (9:33-34). This is a good model for us in our personal and corporate confessions: we must not try to soften the blow by downplaying our sin. Instead, we ought to take all the blame for ourselves, and give all the credit to the Lord!
 - iii. Their confession focuses not just on overtly sinful actions, but on their failure to pay attention to the Word of God. This is a good reminder for us that even if we have not committed any scandalous deeds that are currently bothering our consciences, we *always* have sins to confess. These can be sins of the heart,¹⁰ or failures to be as attentive and love the Lord as we ought. Remember that the gold standard of the Law, as Christ says, is loving the Lord our God, "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."¹¹ That means your *whole being*, and it is not something you will ever accomplish in this life.
 - iv. We can also see from Nehemiah 9 that just because a confession is being prayed corporately does not mean it has to be vague. There are strong patterns in all of our hearts, because of our sinful nature, that we can earnestly confess together (have any of us truly been as attentive to the Word of God as we ought to be?). We can also take this lesson from numerous historical prayers of corporate confession, which often probe much deeper into our inner selves than we are used to.¹²

⁹ This is particularly clear starting in Nehemiah 9:17: "They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them."

¹⁰ One of my favorite prayers of confession is from Augustine, when he confesses the sin of thinking too much! "Lord God, I know it is written that 'sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues' (Proverbs 10:19). Help me to speak only by proclaiming your word, and by praising you! I should please you in whatever I say. For a man you blessed [Paul] encouraged his true son in the faith [Timothy] to 'preach the word' and 'be prepared in season and out of season' did not say too much, did he? **Set me free, O God, from too much speech within my soul.** I fly for refuge to your mercy, for my thoughts are not silent, even when I say nothing out loud. You know my thoughts. May they not overtake me or lead me to act on them. But at least let my opinions and my conscience be safe from these thoughts, under your protection." - *Fount of Heaven: Prayers of the Early Church*, 238.

¹¹ Mark 12:30

¹² For example, Peter Dathenus, a reformer in Heidelberg, Germany, used this prayer for his congregation's corporate confession: "O eternal God and most gracious Father, from the depth of our hearts we humble ourselves before your high Majesty, against which we

Conclusion: Reading the law and confessing our sins together in public worship is not a burden if we truly understand the purpose of the Law and the Gospel in Scripture. The Law is designed to lead us to an accurate self-assessment; to see ourselves as God would see us if we stood before him apart from Christ. In this way it does not add to our burdens; it *reveals* the burdens we are already carrying but have tried to forget. This stings in the moment, but only because we still have pride in our souls that wants us to be equal with God.¹³ Our sinful flesh wants to believe that our sin is really not that bad, or at least that we are better than *those people*. But these are lies, like the Serpent told Eve in the Garden, and we need to have them corrected for us each and every week.

The truly amazing thing that we find, when we do submit to the Law as it humbles us, is that there is *joy* on the other side of this. Once you see yourself as you are, and that you cannot save yourself in any way, it is a relief to discover you are not the main character in your life's story. This is what the believing Jews who followed Ezra and Nehemiah realized: forgiveness for their sins depended on the Lord their God's initiative. They had only to receive it by faith, which was also a gift from God by his Spirit.¹⁴ He would save them for the sake of his own glory,¹⁵ bringing them into joyous fellowship with himself. All of these promises were partly fulfilled when they returned from Exile, but only partly.¹⁶ Their final fulfillment would only come with God's Son, Jesus Christ coming into the world to live and die as our perfect sacrifice, and to be raised up and live forever as our perfect High Priest and most glorious King, not only of Israel, but of *every nation*. When we receive the Assurance of Pardon in our order of worship, it is because of his merits alone. He gives us the rest from our sins that the Old Testament sabbaths represented. Just think of one of the most common texts for an Assurance of Pardon in a Reformed worship service: Romans 8:31-34. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." Can you fail to rejoice when our elders read a text like that to you? May it never be.

have sinned so frequently and heinously, and we confess that (if you desired to bring us to judgment) we deserve nothing but eternal death. Due to original sin, we are all impure and children of wrath, conceived with sinful need and born in unrighteousness. Therefore, all kinds of evil lusts are dwelling in us, waging war against you and our neighbor. In addition to this, we have frequently and perpetually transgressed your commandments with our deeds, neglecting what you have commanded and doing what you have clearly forbidden. We have gone astray like sheep and greatly sinned against you. This we confess, and we heartily regret it. Indeed, we confess our futility; and to the praise of your mercy toward us, we confess that our sins exceed the number of hairs on our head, and that we owe ten thousand pounds, which we are unable to repay. Therefore, we are also not worthy to be called your children, nor to lift up our eyes to heaven to speak our prayers before you." - *Reformation Worship*, edited by Jonathan Gibson & Mark Earngey, 626-627.

¹³ "The law discovers and uncovers the 'sinful pollutions' of our 'nature, heart, and lives' (WCF 19.6). As we sit under God's law, we hear all the ways we have failed our Lord in thought, word, and deed by what we have done and even by what we have left undone (in the words of an old prayer). So we read God's law to be put in our place. It's an act of submitting to God as Lord over our lives. We don't get to call the shots; He does - and has - in His holy law." - Jonathan Landry Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship*, 118.

¹⁴ "I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." - Ezekiel 36:24-28

¹⁵ "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes." - Ezekiel 36:22-23

¹⁶ You can see in the last lines of their confession that the Exile isn't really fully over: "Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress." - Nehemiah 9:36-37.