

## **Wise Preaching: Applying Oneself to the Abilities of the Congregation**

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**L**et us begin with a simple question: What is wisdom? What does the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 159) have in view when preachers are instructed to “preach sound doctrine ... wisely.” What is wisdom?

“Wisdom” is one of those terms that has developed a different meaning in popular usage than its technical definition. Popular usage treats “wisdom” as roughly synonymous with being smart or being brilliant. It is construed as a measure of intelligence. There is nothing wrong with this popular usage of the word, so long as we carefully distinguish those contexts in which the term is being used for its proper meaning — like in the Westminster Standards and in Scripture.

Employing the term for its proper import, even a poorly educated person may be deemed “wise.” And a brilliant person might be labeled a “fool.” Wisdom is not about how much you have in your head, but how well you use what is in your head. Wisdom is a skill, not a measure of smarts. A mechanical engineer may understand the processes taking place under the hood of your car; but if he cannot tell you what to do about a rattle in your engine, you had better seek the wisdom of the mechanic at the local garage. Wisdom is practical insight for life.

Under the popular notion of “wisdom,” we might suppose that “wise preaching” means erudite or smart preaching. But that is not what we have in mind, here. The Catechism invokes the proper meaning of the term in its definition of wise preaching: “They that are called to labor in the ministry of the word, are to preach sound doctrine ... wisely,” which the Catechism expands upon with this definition: “applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers.”

Wise preaching does not require lots of degrees or fluency in the original languages. Wise preaching does not require big words or a background in philosophy. There is nothing wrong — and lots to appreciate — in such gifts of education. But what makes preaching wise is the minister’s capacity to understand his congregation — to know their capacities and their needs, to empathize with their joys and their struggles — and to apply skillfully God’s Word to the experiences they face.

There is one passage in the Scriptures where the exhortation to wise preaching is given particular emphasis. In fact, as will be shown in this article, this narrative is provided in the Bible specifically as a model for wise preaching. The passage concerned is the preaching of Ezra and his model worship service recorded in Nehemiah chapter 8. After a quick consideration of Ezra’s commission in Ezra chapter 7, his model preaching service in Nehemiah chapter 8 will be explored at more length.

### **Ezra’s Diaspora Commission (Ezra 7:25)**

Ezra’s commission for his work in Jerusalem is recorded, in full, in Ezra 7:12–26. There is one line that needs to be highlighted, for this article, from verse 25: “And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the

people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach” (ESV).

Ezra’s calling was to teach God’s Word. Not only in Jerusalem, but Ezra was to take God’s Word out to the diaspora. Some have interpreted the wording of this charge to indicate that the whole Persian province called “Beyond the River” was placed under the Law of Moses. But this conclusion is not necessarily what the passage has in view. Rather, the Hebrew people had been dispersed throughout that province. And Ezra has been charged to administer the wisdom of God to His people throughout that province.

Some of the Hebrews in the diaspora knew God’s Law and needed officers to oversee their organization into observant communities, far from Jerusalem. But many of the Hebrews in the diaspora had lost sight of their heritage and did not know the Law of Moses. These Jews needed to be taught the Law.

The phrase “according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand” captures the portability of what Ezra was doing. As a scribe, Ezra had been recompiling the Law of Moses into portable scrolls to extend the teaching ministry of the Temple into the wider world. (By the way, Ezra is also the most likely candidate for having compiled a certain subset of the vast library of Temple songs into the portable, 150 Psalm collection we now have in the canon.<sup>1</sup>) Indeed, Ezra was earnest about the proper organization of worship on-site in Jerusalem. But his further calling was to facilitate the ability of the Jews, living far away from Jerusalem in settings where they cannot sacrifice and cannot see the Temple, to remain faithful and live in keeping with the wisdom of God. It is that aspect of Ezra’s commission which offers an important backdrop for the events recorded in Nehemiah chapter 8.

### **Ezra’s Diaspora Model (Neh. 8:1–12)**

Nehemiah 8:1-12 describes a worship assembly held on a specific date: “And all the people gathered as one man ... on the first day of the seventh month” (verses. 1–2). According to passages like Leviticus 23:23–25 and Numbers 29:1–6, the assembly held on the first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets. It was a day when the Trumpet was sounded, and the people gathered at the Temple for worship with a series of appointed sacrifices. Nehemiah 8:2 identifies this assembly as being that gathering.

But remarkably, this text says nothing about the day’s eponymous trumpet blast. Nor does the text say anything about the sacrifices that were appointed for that date. In fact, the gathering that is described takes place in a secular space, “And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate” (verse. 1). The Temple is never mentioned anywhere in this narrative. The lack of reference to these stock features of the Feast of Trumpets does not mean Ezra ignored the instructions of the Law for the festival celebration. We do not argue from silence that the sacrifices and trumpet blasts and Temple courtyard gatherings did not happen. On the contrary, from the date assigned for this gathering, we can assume those instructions would have been fulfilled. But this text is selective in the features it reports for a purpose.

Rather than reporting what happened inside the Temple, this narrative is focused on what a holy day gathering looks like outside the Temple — in a space where sacrifices cannot be offered. In his role as a teacher of the diaspora, Ezra presents this service as a model of festival worship for those who must gather in a city square, where they can neither hear the Temple’s trumpet blast

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<sup>1</sup> On the present author’s writings on the canonical Psalter, its redactional shape and intent, see Michael LeFebvre, “Torah-Meditation and the Psalms: The Invitation of Psalm 1,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. Philip S. Johnston & David Firth (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2005), 213-225 and Michael LeFebvre, “‘On His Law He Meditates’: What Is Psalm 1 Introducing?,” *JSOT* 40, no. 4 (2016): 439-450.

nor perform the assigned altar sacrifices. And we notice how, in such a setting modeled in this narrative, the centerpiece of worship outside of the Temple is the proclamation of the Word. The emphatic theme of this narrative is on *preaching*. “All the people ... told Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses ... And he read from it facing the square ... And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law ... And Ezra opened the book ... [and] the Levites helped the people understand the Law ... They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

Now the reading and preaching of Scripture had always been a vital aspect in the worship of God’s people. But in the Temple, it was the acted-out message of atonement performed by the priest at the altar that was the centerpiece of worship. The performance of the atonement in an object lesson at the altar was the heart of Temple worship. However, in cities and gathering places far away from the Temple, where the sacrifices were not to be practiced, Ezra—in his duty as a teacher of the diaspora — sets this model. The proclamation of God’s Law about the sacrifices and the high priest’s intercession was central.

The atonement still took center stage in diaspora worship, but through its proclamation from the Book of the Law rather than its typological performance at the altar. This record of Ezra’s service on the Feast of Trumpets is recounted by Nehemiah in a manner that provides a model for diaspora worship gatherings on such a holy day. As such, the model it provides is one that stresses the preaching of God’s Word. Indeed, as we will see next, *wise preaching* is here emphasized.

### **The Centrality of Wise Preaching**

The narrative in Nehemiah 8:1–12 emphasizes preaching with wisdom in connection with this model worship gathering conducted outside of the Temple courts. Five times this text repeats the term “understanding” (verses. 2, 3, 7, 8, 12) with emphasis on the people — not just the priests — understanding what is preached. Preaching for the congregation’s understanding (i.e., wise preaching) is the emphatic heart of what Ezra models.

In the first two references to “understanding” (verses. 2, 3), we are told that the people assembled in order to understand. “All the people gathered ... both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard” (verses.1–2; see also verse. 3). That final phrase, “and all who could understand,” serves as a purpose statement for the “men and women” gathering. The people assembled with an expectation to hear and to understand.

Granted, the construction of these phrases might refer to three groups of people (rather than two groups of people and a purpose statement). Many commentators read this text as a description of three groups: (1) the men, (2) the women, and (3) this mysterious additional group called, “all who could understand what they heard.” The natural assumption, then, is that “all who could understand” refers to children of a certain age and capacity. Including children in worship is certainly beneficial, even when children cannot fully understand. But that is not the likely intent in this passage. The Hebrew *waw* conjunction (“and”) is sometimes used appositionally for emphasis, comparable to the English word “indeed.” And that is likely the intent here. The people gather, “both men and women, *indeed* all who could understand.” This focus on understanding is not to place limitations on the group gathering, as though Levitical ushers stood at the gate and gave an I.Q. test to allow entry. The point is to emphasize the purpose for having all the men and women there. An apt paraphrase would be, “The people assembled with both men and women, indeed all in their capacity to understand.” The text is emphasizing the congregation’s expectation to understand. Worshipers are here introduced primarily as “understanders.”

After those two references to the people’s expectation to understand, the narrative gives two references to the leaders in their capacity to give understanding. First, verses 4–8 show the

leaders reading and preaching the Scriptures with two-fold emphasis (verses. 7, 8) on their specific concern for the people's understanding.

The reading of the Law is described in verses 4–5. The text lists a panel of men who join Ezra on the platform for the reading portion of the service. “Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiyah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiyah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand” (verse. 4). There are 14 readers altogether, including Ezra in the center. Ezra is the one who leads the reading, but the implication seems to be that this whole line of men participates in the reading with him.

Then in verse 7, the explanation or preaching of the Word follows its reading. Again, there is a panel of colleagues who join Ezra for the preaching. “Also Jeshua, Bani, Shebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law” (verse. 7). Including Ezra, there are fourteen preachers. They are all Levites, ordained ministers of the Law, who participate with Ezra in the exposition following the reading.

We have no idea who these twenty six readers and expositors are, who serve alongside of Ezra. They are all named, but they are not mentioned again in Scripture. They are likely listed here to demonstrate that Ezra shared the mantle of this office of the Word with others. Most listeners who hear this story will not have Ezra himself as their reader and preacher. They will not have an inspired prophet to preach for them. Most who hear this narrative will have a Shema or a Mishael or a Kelita in the pulpit. Our text is not setting up celebrity preaching as the model, as though the success of this institution depends on having an inspired prophet in the pulpit. Ezra is shown in partnership with others, in order to demonstrate that the audience's local worship gathering, whoever their ministers of the Word might be, legitimately participates in the model established by Ezra. This preaching arrangement indicates a sharing of the mantle between Ezra and those standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him in the work.

But notice how the text underscores the purpose of the fourteen readers and the fourteen expositors. The section ends with the simple statement, “The Levites helped the people to understand the Law” (verse. 7). Then, expanding upon that goal of “understanding,” verse 8 unpacks that thematic conclusion with a grand summary of the efforts by both readers and preachers to promote the people's understanding. “They [referring back to the panel of readers] read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, [and] they [now referring to the Levitical preachers] gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (verse. 8).

This summary statement indicates that this message of understanding truly is the author's focus in this text. The Holy Spirit wants us to see how devoted these worship leaders are to reading and preaching wisely — that is, to preach in a way that brings the people to understand. They are not preaching to show the preacher's brilliance, nor to accomplish a ritual experience, but to bring the Word to bear upon the capacities and needs of the congregation.

The fourteen readers read from the book in a manner that made the reading “clear.” Some commentators limit this clarity to clear enunciation or to paragraph by paragraph reading. Others think that the clarity involves translation, reading the Hebrew text in Aramaic for the benefit of Aramaic speakers in the audience. Whatever it took to make the reading clear, that is what the first panel of leaders did.

Second, the Levites gave “the sense” of what was read, so the people understood. This would involve what we call “preaching.” It is not enough for the people to comprehend the words that are read; they must be helped to understand how the Scriptures apply to their own lives. Such preaching is what Westminster calls “wise preaching,” or preaching “to the necessities and capacities of the hearers.”

Thus, we have seen how our text twice presents the people as gathering with an expectation to understand the Word. And twice, our text presents the leaders, reading and explaining, in order to give the people understanding. Finally, the entire worship service is brought to its climax with the text's fifth emphasis on "understanding."

Verse 12, at the end of Ezra's worship gathering, reports the outcome of the assembly. "And all the people ... made great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them." The people rejoiced on that day because God had spoken to them, and they understood his words. Five times, this model service for diaspora congregations scattered far from the Temple features wise preaching as its centerpiece — applying the word to the capacity and needs of the people.

### **The Uniqueness of Wise Preaching**

This emphasis on wise preaching in worship might seem unremarkable to Christians, today. Reading and explaining God's Word is rightly ingrained into the DNA of the church. Because of the model Ezra set for us, wise preaching has become the norm of any well-ordered church. So it might not seem all that remarkable. However, such preaching was a remarkable distinctive in Ezra's day.

Typically, in the ancient world, the stories of a nation's religion were taught to the people. At a nation's temples and in other settings, the stories of a people were told. But the laws — and in particular the cultic laws — of ancient religions were only taught to the religious experts, not to the general public. But the Pentateuch that Ezra recompiled for teaching the diaspora was strangely unique in this regard. Here was a set of books combining national stories with lots of judicial and ritual laws into one collection of books intended for *public preaching* and — as Nehemiah 8:1–12 emphasizes — for *public understanding*. That kind of preaching is remarkable and needed to be emphasized for Ezra's generation.

Has the reader ever noticed how much of the Pentateuch is devoted to ritual instructions? Half of the Book of Exodus — a full half of the book, from chapter 25 to the end — is devoted to the design and manufacture of the tabernacle in all its intricate details. Also, the entire Book of Leviticus is devoted to all manner of instruction on sacrifices and rituals. No other ancient law book for public teaching was like the Old Testament!

Rather than viewing such a preponderance of ritual alongside stories in the Pentateuch as a point of onerous drudgery, we should realize what Ezra is doing. Ezra's republication of the Law, combined with wise preaching, would enable the people of God living far away from the Jerusalem Temple to participate vicariously in the sacraments taking place there. Diaspora believers might never see the Temple for themselves. They might never be able to take their own sacrifice there, in person. And they might never meet the high priest. Nevertheless, through the institution of wise preaching of the Law (including its ritual components), Ezra was enabling the people to understand the high priest's work in God's presence to intercede and atone for them. Scripture is eager for us to see that Ezra undertook his commission to take God's Law to the diaspora with institutions in place to ensure the people understood it. We are shown the institution of wise preaching under Ezra toward that end in Nehemiah 8:1–12.

Surely, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and all the prophets, sought to preach to the needs and capacities of the people. But with the dawning of diaspora worship far from the object-lessons of the temple, the role model worship service under Ezra placed preaching front-and-center. What the *Catechism* calls "wise preaching" is the main emphasis of the scene here displayed.

### **Understanding the Word—and Responding**

In this treatment of Ezra's model preaching service, we have only focused on the five places where "understanding" is mentioned as the goal of the gathering. There are many other

liturgical details that further highlight the centrality of the Word in that service. A platform was built to uphold the Word. The people rose, they bowed to worship, and they engaged in various other practices that helped to open their hearts to hear from God through his Word. Such details strengthen the narrative's interest in the congregation's reception of the Word. But the story's conclusion centers on the people's response to the Word after they understood it. In fact, the closing paragraph (verses. 9–12) introduces a stunning twist in the story.

The people's initial response to Ezra's preaching was to weep. "All the people wept as they heard the words of the Law" (verse. 9). God's Law exposed their sins, revealing how much the people had lost because of their rebellion. The people heard and understood; and, because they understood, they wept. Their weeping was proper. But, this was not a day for weeping.

The first verse of the subsequent chapter (Neh. 9:1) points to another assembly held on a later date in order to give the people an opportunity to fast and repent. This would be a day for weeping. The people's initial response to weep upon understanding the Law was, ultimately, correct. However, that particular assembly on a holy day was not to be such a day. That was to be a day for feasting. "Nehemiah ... and Ezra ... and the Levites ... said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep'" (verse. 9).

Because it was a festival day, this day was for communion with God and feasting with one another. Even though God's Law convicted their hearts on that day, the overarching fact that God had delighted to speak to the people was itself a cause for them to rejoice. So, the final scene of the passage, which takes place after the end of the preaching service, shows the governor, along with Ezra and the Levites, going about to calm the people in their weeping, urging them to set aside their tears and to rejoice. The day needed to be celebrated with feasting, not with fasting, because God had rejoiced over them by giving them His Word.

Unfortunately, the key phrase of the leaders' exhortations is an enigma for interpreters: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (verse. 10). What does this expression mean, for "the joy of the LORD" to be the people's strength? Is it the people's joy in the Lord that is in view (an objective genitive), or the Lord's joy in the people that is intended (a subjective genitive)? Both are grammatically possible. Without sorting through the many interpretations attempted for this assertion, the sense is that it is God's joy over His people that is in view. This phrase is not about our waxing and waning joy in the Lord, but the fact of the Lord's joy over His people. When the Lord rejoices over His people, that rejoicing, on its own, is a source of security and peace for the people. The Hebrew term translated "strength" (*ma'oz*) typically refers to "a strong *place*" or "a refuge." When the Lord delights in his people, that delight in itself is a place of security.

Ezra and his colleagues have helped the people understand the Law, such that they are weeping. But now, they further help the people understand the delight of God indicated by the mere fact that he has given them His Word, and their assurance of peace in that blessing. So, they are exhorted to honor the holy day with joy, and to wait to fast on another day. The day is holy — a day when God's delight in his people has been discovered in the hearing of His Law. Therefore, as guilty and broken as the people may be under the strictures of that Law, the promised atonement of that Law comforts the people with peace. So they are helped to rejoice. "And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them" (verse. 12).

This flipped response — from weeping to feasting — is a remarkable twist in the story. It is a twist that further underscores the wise shepherding that accompanies the wise preaching of God's Word. Wise preaching does not end with the pulpit. Wise preaching seeks to help the congregation both to understand God's Word aright and to respond to his Word aright. Like the auto mechanic who helps the driver understand — and know what to do about — that rattle

under the hood, wise preaching includes helping the people know what to do about the truths they have heard.

This closing scene captures, in a nutshell, the complexity of wise preaching, with its call for grieving and joy, often in the same context. Preaching must not be done to satisfy the preacher's own position of power or insight. Preaching is for the nurture and care of the flock. The Word must be brought to bear on the believers, both for their conviction (with weeping) and for their faith (with joy). Wisdom is not scholarly brilliance. Wisdom is practical guidance. Ezra serves as the model for preachers today, as we continue the calling to help the people of God understand His law in the global diaspora awaiting our final ingathering into His house — when Jesus comes again.

### **Preaching for a Living Faith**

In Nehemiah 8:1–12, we encounter a model of wise preaching painted with broad but vivid strokes. This scene centers on wise preaching, but we do not actually hear the sermon itself that Ezra and his associates preached. For that kind of content, we would need to press further ahead into Nehemiah chapters 9 and 10.

In Nehemiah chapter 9, a long prayer is recorded, wherein the people are led in specific points of repentance before God's Law. And, in Nehemiah chapter 10, the people are led in a specific series of reforms in response to God's Law. Preaching with wisdom does involve specific points of application, as indicated in those subsequent passages. However, in closing, note the importance of this heart of grieving and joy which we have already recognized in Ezra's inaugural preaching service.

Far too often, we suppose that wise preaching will focus on those practical applications of "things to do." Practical application of the Scripture is part of wise preaching, as just noted. But often, what the people of God need first and foremost, is simply to be renewed in their faith — with hearts stirred to grieve and rejoice before the Lord. In fact, whatever "practical" applications we might further draw from Scripture, all our responses to the Word must be anchored in renewed faith. And more than anything else, wise preaching is preaching that enables the congregation to understand the majesty of God and the marvel of his mercies from the heart.

The closing picture of the people's emotional state is provided as a window into their hearts' renewal in living faith. In the typical "show and tell" style of Old Testament narrative, the external actions of the people are provided as a window into the invisible transitions of their souls. The story describes their tears and their feasts as an external demonstration of faith, which is the vital response sought through wise preaching. It is faith that comes from the hearing of the Word, and which is the goal of preaching the Word wisely.

The joy of the Lord is the security of God's people (Nehemiah 8:10). This is why our calling as preachers is not to be scholars of the book, but pastors of the flock. Our calling is not to wow the people with the cleverness of the teacher, but to open the congregation's hearts to the joy of the Savior. Therefore, to be a wise preacher, one must know the Scriptures — and one must also know the congregation, as did Ezra and his fellow preachers.