

Unwavering Resolve

Revived by the Word

Nehemiah 8

July 5, 2026

Introduction

(Slide - Christian Smith)

Twenty years ago, a sociologist named Christian Smith spent years interviewing American teenagers about their religious lives. What he found became one of the more significant pieces of research on American Christianity in this century. Most of these teenagers, many of them raised in churches like ours, held to a set of beliefs Smith **(SLIDE) called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.**

A God exists. He wants people to be good and nice to each other. The central goal of life is to feel good about yourself. God is not particularly involved in your life except to resolve problems and remain accessible when you need him.

Smith was not describing a fringe group. He was describing the working theology operating underneath whatever doctrinal statement those teenagers could recite if you asked them. And when this research was published, it was like the COVID pandemic for church life. And now, like COVID, it's just in the air. **It is alive in Christians of every age, in any given church on a given Sunday.**

(TITLE SLIDE) So I am not describing a problem out there, in some other church with a thinner gospel and a great production. **I am describing a temptation that lives in everyone of our hearts ... to believe that God exists to make us feel better about ourselves and make our lives easier. That God exists to give me life, liberty, and the pursuit of my happiness.**

In fact, let me give us a sentence designed to help us think about ourselves and the church. We might be a practicing moralistic therapeutic deism ... or go to a moralistic therapeutic deistic church if we are:

(SLIDE) A people sure of our own goodness, gathered around our own felt needs, hearing things that make us feel better about ourselves, being confirmed in who we already are.

In our text today, Nehemiah 8, we see a very different kind of gathering. Instead of a **people sure of their own goodness, gathered around their own felt needs, hearing things that**

make them feel better about themselves, being confirmed in who they already were, we see the following:

(SLIDE) A people gathered around a Word they did not write, hearing things that did not flatter them, being formed into something they could not have produced by following their own instincts.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism asks God to affirm the self you already are. A church like this cultivates the temporary hope of the self in every generation.

Nehemiah 8 asks you to let the Word of God tell you who you actually are, so the God behind that Word can begin making you into someone new. A church like that is cultivating the unwavering of God in every generation.

So let's dive in and see how this played in Nehemiah 8.

Body

Hunger for the Word (Nehemiah 8:1-6)

Take a look at (most of) Nehemiah 8:1-6. **(SLIDES)**

(When) the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel.

² ... the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. ³ ... he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

⁵ Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, "Amen, Amen!" Then they knelt low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

(TITLE SLIDE)

This is an incredible moment when you think about the greater context. The people who gathered at the Water Gate that morning had every reason to stay apart. They came from different households, different corners of the city, different walks of life, and in any other setting they likely disagreed about plenty. **(Slide)** Yet the Bible tells us they assembled as one, ***and the thing that unified them was a shared hunger for God's Word.***

Notice too who asked for it. Verse 1 says the people told Ezra to bring out the book. Their leaders did not have to talk them into this. The desire came from below, not from above, and that detail matters. Genuine hunger for Scripture is not something a pastor manufactures in a congregation. It is something God awakens. When people crave his Word, they are responding to something the Spirit has stirred in them, not something a program produced.

Now, we as ministers are doing our level best to put the Word of God in front of you in intentional and strategic ways.

- Your worship guide has Scripture tied to the songs we're singing.
- We create a custom Bible reading plan and write whole devotional books in line with the reading plan.
- We have one benediction verse every sermon series, which is my sneaky way of getting you to memorize Scripture.
- Our kids ministry has kids memorizing verses in their life groups.
- Our student ministry this past school year has gone verse by verse through Ephesians and James some of Mark, and they are eating it up.
- Our college ministry students are now at a place in their hunger for their Word that they are ready to take our life groups off campus and hold them ON campus, leading them themselves.

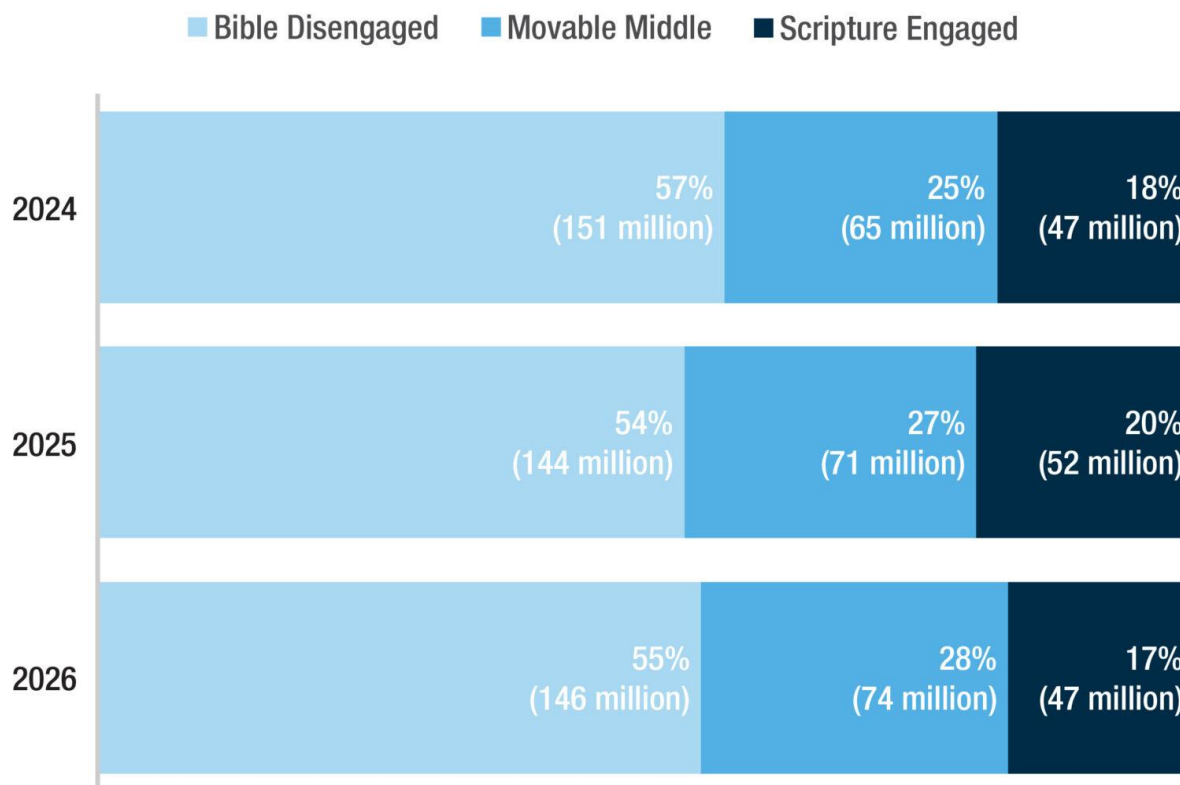
All that work would be in vain if you, of your own volition, do not hunger for God's Word.

And if you want a picture of what a hunger for God's Word looks like, it's here in Nehemiah 8. **Every eye stayed fixed on the platform. Every ear leaned toward Ezra's voice. Their ears were, in effect, all pointed toward the book. They stood when the scroll opened. They lifted their hands and answered "Amen, Amen" in worship. They bowed their faces to the ground in submission. This was the natural response of people who understood they were listening to the voice of God.** A people who are truly hungry for God's Word lean into it. They let it search them. They answer it with their whole selves, not only their attention.

Application/Illustration

I don't know about you, but by and large, this is not happening among Christians in the United States these days, and it should concern us. Check out these stats from the American Bible Society. **(SLIDE) – Scripture Engagement.**

Scripture Engagement, 2024–2026



Do you have a hunger for the Word of God? Years ago, I did a 21-day cleanse of my diet, which included removing coffee. It hurt. I'll spare you the details, but it hurt. I don't recommend it. And the same is true for going without God's Word, daily. It hurts. It's not recommended. Before a podcast featuring a conversation about the Bible ... before someone else's sermon from the Bible ... YOU. YOUR BIBLE. Hunger for the Word.

Application of the Word (Nehemiah 8:7-12)

Hunger for the Word changes us, and the change that took place in the people of Nehemiah 8 is instructive. Look at vv. 7-12 with me. **(SLIDES)**

7 ... Levites explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. 8 They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.

9 Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.

10 Then he said to them, “Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

11 And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, since today is holy. Don’t grieve.” 12 Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them.

Notice the impact of God’s Word on God’s people in this passage. **(SLIDE) There is conviction. There is obedience. There is joy. That’s the pathway. Conviction. Obedience. Joy.**

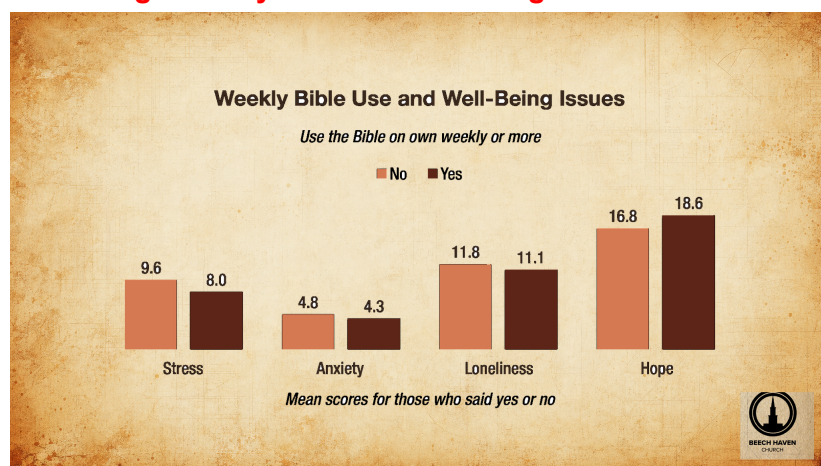
Conviction is what happens when truth finally reaches a place in you that excuses have kept guarded for years. It rarely feels good in the moment, and it is not supposed to. But conviction that never moves anywhere just curdles into shame, and shame is not the same thing as change. That is why obedience has to come next.

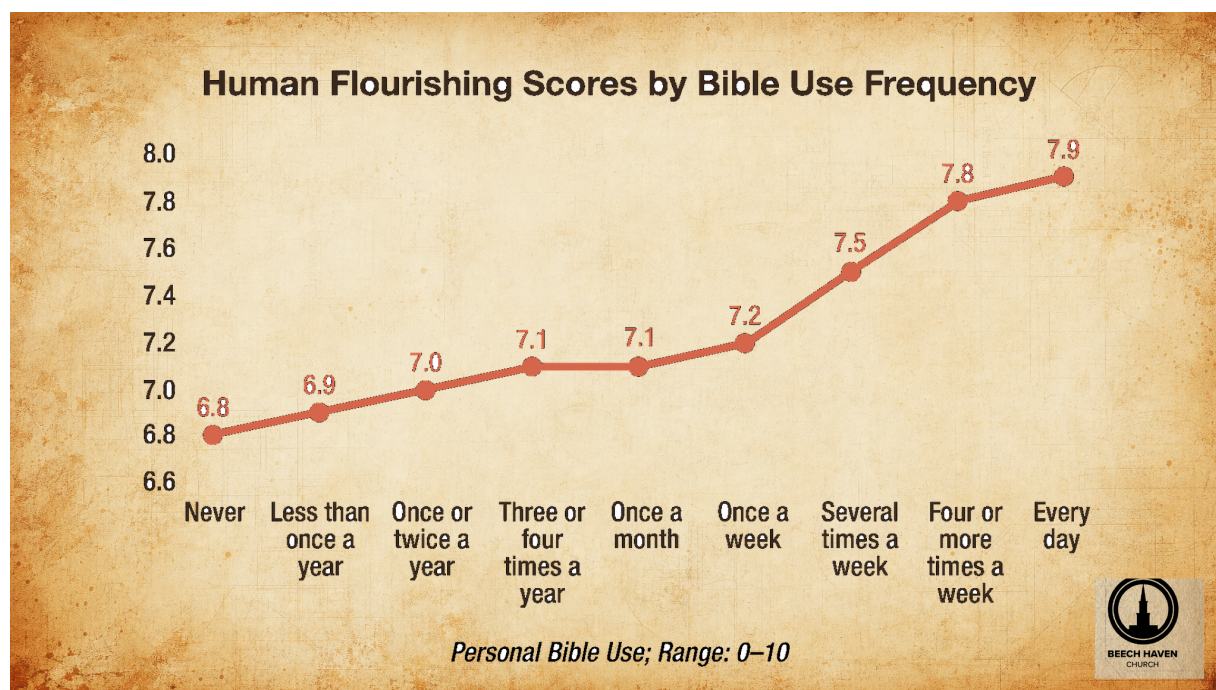
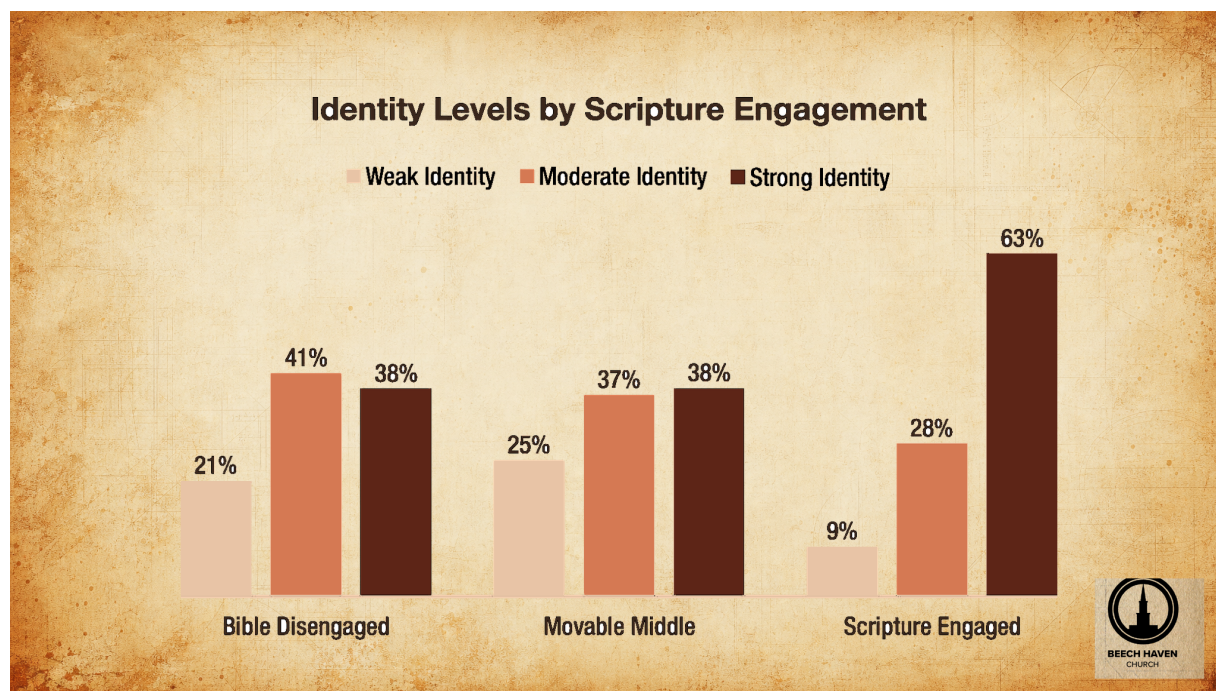
Obedience is what conviction looks like once it decides to stop negotiating. It is the moment you quit explaining yourself and simply do the next right thing, even if your heart has not fully caught up yet.

And then joy arrives. **Joy is what waits for you on the other side of conviction and obedience.** Most of us want to skip straight to joy. We want to feel better without being told the truth, and we want peace without ever having to act on what convicted us. **But that shortcut does not exist.** The only road to real joy runs directly through conviction and obedience, and anyone who tries to bypass either one ends up with a counterfeit of the thing they were actually after.

And there is real joy for us if we give ourselves to God’s Word. **(3 SLIDES as I say them)**

Well being. Identity. Human flourishing.





These are just glimpses of the kind of joy (which is different from happiness) that await us if we will hunger for God's Word and give ourselves to it ... if we will let it expose our sin and offer us hope. Which leads us to the last thing that we see the Word do in God's people. **(TITLE SLIDE)**

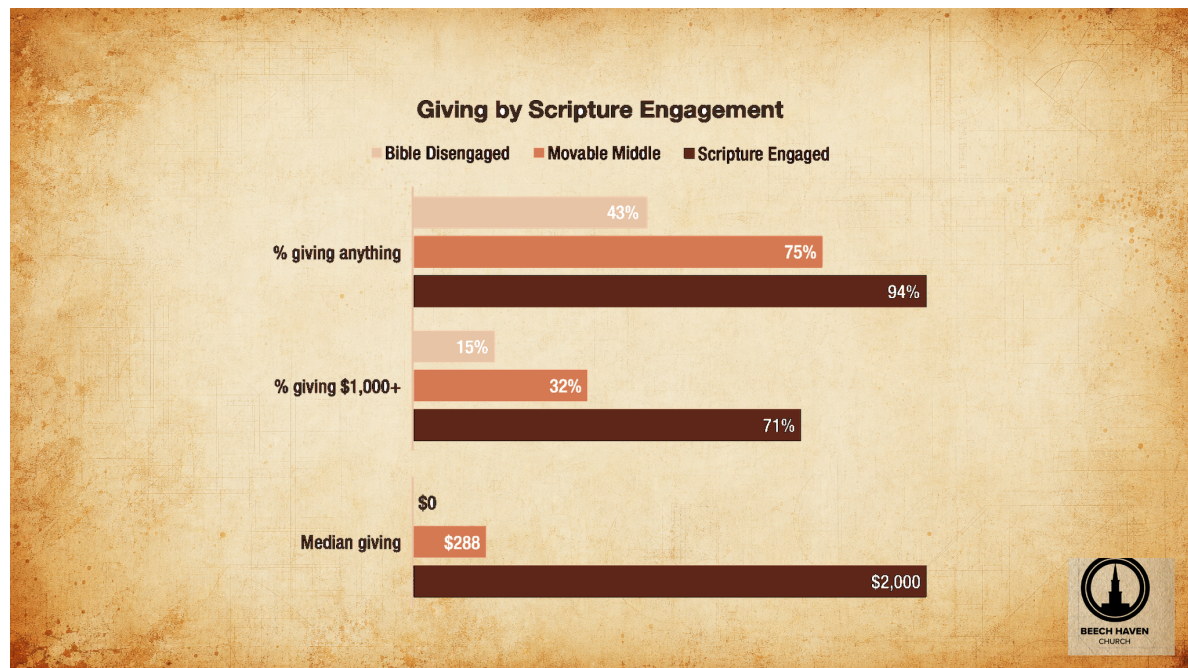
Sharing of the Word (Nehemiah 8:13-18)

The day after the reading at the Water Gate, the leaders go back to Ezra to study the law even more closely, and in doing so they rediscover the command to celebrate the Festival of Booths, **a practice Israel had not kept properly since the days of Joshua.**

(To give you some idea of this, consider our culture's obsession with Christmas, which is in no way commanded in Scripture. Christians have vehemently fought to "keep Christ in Christmas," and we can't imagine a culture without this tradition (if only for economic reasons). Yet the people of God ignored for centuries a commanded celebration).

Yet they now act on it immediately, building booths all over Jerusalem and keeping the festival for seven days with Ezra reading from the law each day, closing with a final assembly on the eighth day. All of it amounts to a joyful display of life in obedience to God's Word.

Joy in God is palpable. It's unusually effervescent. Joy in God is what actually produces the desire to share and the energy to serve. A person who has genuinely tasted what God has done for them does not need to be talked into generosity or witness. They cannot help it, and it all started with engaged with the Word of God. When we engage with God's Word, we apply it and we share it. Look at this slide from the American Bible Society on the impact Bible engagement has on generosity and service. **(SLIDE)**



There is an unmistakable statistical relationship between our Bible engagement and our mission engagement. If our churches feel low on evangelism and service, the deeper issue is rarely a lack of programs. It is usually a shortage of real joy, the kind that remembers what God has

done and trusts what he has promised, the kind that cannot stay contained in one life and always spills into the lives around it.

Which takes us back to the beginning of the message. Remember this phrase? **(SLIDE) MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM.**

God exists, wants people to be good and nice, and mainly serves to help people feel good about themselves and solve problems when called upon. Notice what is missing from that picture. There's **NO CONVICTION.**

(SLIDE – ~~Conviction~~ – Obedience - Joy)

There is no moment where a person stands before a holy God and sees something in themselves that must be confronted and repented of. The God of moralistic therapeutic deism is not close enough or holy enough to produce conviction. It'll produce frustration. It'll produce disappointment. But those things can be overcome with self-determination, which means there is nothing to turn from. Nothing to repent from. Nothing to leave behind. The result is a type of obedience and joy that is very hollow. The obedience is hollow because it's not in response to anything true about your condition, and the joy is hollow because it hasn't been earned through anything painful.

You were made for more than this. **(SLIDE – Conviction - Obedience - Joy) You were made for true joy,** which is only found in conviction and obedience. And all of that begins in a hunger for the WORD OF GOD.

Conclusion/Application

(TITLE SLIDE) This is what we see in Nehemiah 8 this morning: a hunger for the Word that leads to the application of God's Word which leads to joyful participation in God and His mission. The clear application of this text is that we would be a people who hunger for the Word, be convicted by it, obey it, and live the joyful lives that come with that.

But are we willing? Will we settle for the hollowness of moralistic therapeutic deism in order to escape conviction, or will we live truly joyful lives in hunger for and submission to God's Word?

Illustration - The Declaration of Independence

Roughly 250 years ago, the United States declared their independence from the British Empire ruled by King George III. And in that Declaration of Independence, there's a long list of reasons why we did what we did. Economic reasons. Social reasons. Legal reasons. Reasons related to justice. It's a long list. And those grievances amounted to the destruction of what our Founding Fathers called "certain inalienable rights," which included "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of

Happiness.” And so hungry were the citizens of the United States for those rights that they declared the following **(SLIDE)**:

“... whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government”

So hungry were our founding fathers for their rights that they abolished a government to secure them. **(SLIDE) What do you need to alter or abolish to secure a hunger for God's Word?**

Good News for MTD Prone People

Here is the good news. You do not have to alter or abolish anything on your own.

(TITLE SLIDE) If you have been practicing a moralistic, therapeutic faith that bypasses conviction and robs you of joyful obedience, today can be different. You do not need a new set of resolutions. **You need a Savior who fulfilled the law that could not truly reform, and abolished sin's claim on you, once and for all.** If you have never trusted Christ, this is the moment to stop managing your own religion and start resting in his finished work.

And if you already belong to him, let today be the day your hunger for his Word gets renewed, not as one more item to manage, but as the ordinary means by which he keeps doing in you exactly what he did in that crowd at the Water Gate. Conviction that leads somewhere. Obedience that costs something. And joy that no circumstance can take back.