

Ezra and Nehemiah

The Reading of the Word

Lesson #6 for November 9, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 8:1-12; Deuteronomy 31:9-13; Matthew 17:5; Acts 8:26-38; Leviticus 23:39-43.

1. This lesson will focus on events found in Nehemiah 8. These events happened when the leaders of the people, rejoicing after the rebuilding of the wall and seeking God's continued guidance, encouraged the people to gather for the reading and understanding of God's Word.
2. As we have noted before, in Scripture there are numerous *chiasms*. A *chiasm* is a literary structure in which the ideas form a large V or X with the most important point being in the middle. Look at the structure of Nehemiah 8.
 - A. Book of the Law read (*Neh. 8:1, 2*)
 - B. People respond and worship the Lord (*Neh. 8:3-6*)
 - C. Understanding the reading (*Neh. 8:7, 8*)
 - D. This day is holy: do not mourn nor weep (*Neh. 8:9*)
 - E. The joy of the Lord is your strength (*Neh. 8:10*)**
 - D'. This day is holy: do not be grieved (*Neh. 8:11, 12*)
 - C'. Found in the reading that they should dwell in booths (*Neh. 8:13-15*)
 - B'. People respond and make booths (*Neh. 8:16, 17*)
 - A'. Book of the Law read (*Neh. 8:18*)—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 81.† [Italic type is in the source.]‡

3. How could the Israelites in Nehemiah's day not be joyful and celebrating when they realized: (1) The wall was completed for the first time in decades; (2) The inhabitants of Jerusalem were reasonably protected from foreign enemies; and (3) Even their enemies recognized that this "was done by ... God." (Nehemiah 6:16, *NKJV*)
4. We know that the wall was completed during the month of Elul (sixth month). (Nehemiah 6:15) So, if you were the governor of Judea in those days and you had just succeeded in doing something that had not been possible for decades, what would you do? Nehemiah 8-10 makes it clear that the entire nation was prepared to celebrate, and that is what they did.

Nehemiah 8:1: By the seventh month the people of Israel were all settled in their towns. On the first day of that month [October 8, 445 B.C.] they all assembled in Jerusalem, in the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law which the LORD had given Israel through Moses, to get the book of the Law.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Nehemiah 8:1). New York: American Bible Society.‡

The seventh month, the month of Tishri, was perhaps the most important month for the Israelites, as it was dedicated to the Feast of Trumpets (preparation for God's judgment, first day of the month), the Day of Atonement (judgment day, 10th day of the month), and the Feast of Tabernacles (remembering God's deliverance from Egypt and His provision through the journey in the wilderness, 15th day of the month). The gathering took place on the first day of the month, on which the Feast of Trumpets was celebrated.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, November 3.†

5. As we have already noted in our studies, Ezra spent much of his time as a scholar of the Scriptures, pulling together whatever copies of the Scriptures that he could find among the people in order to establish what we now call the *Old Testament*. On this special Feast of

Tabernacles day, the people came together for the reading of God's Word. Ezra chose to read from the *Torah*. What is interesting to note is that "they"—the people—asked Ezra to read to them from the Book.

Nehemiah 8:2-3: ²So Ezra brought it to the place where the people had gathered—men, women, and **the children who were old enough to understand**. ³There in the square by the gate he read the Law to them from dawn until noon, and they all listened attentively.—*Good News Bible*.*†

6. If you had been Ezra, considering what had just happened and the past seventy years of history, what would you have read?

Deuteronomy 31:9-13: ⁹ So Moses wrote down God's Law [1405 B.C.] and gave it to the levitical priests, who were in charge of the LORD's Covenant Box, and to the leaders of Israel. ¹⁰He commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, when the year that debts are cancelled comes round, read this aloud at the Festival of Shelters. ¹¹Read it to the people of Israel when they come to worship the LORD your God at the one place of worship. ¹²Call together all the men, women, and children, and the foreigners who live in your towns, so that everyone may hear it and learn to honour the LORD your God and to obey his teachings faithfully. ¹³In this way your descendants who have never heard the Law of the LORD your God will hear it. And so they will learn to obey him as long as they live in the land that you are about to occupy across the Jordan."—*Good News Bible*.*†

7. What is exciting about this event is that a large group of people, perhaps a majority of the Jews, came together and were excited to hear the reading of God's Word. We need to remember that when it talks about reading from the Law, it is speaking about the *Torah*, the five books of Moses. It is most likely that he read from the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy foretells—through Moses's three final sermons to the children of Israel—what would happen if they did not follow God's guidance. Listening to Ezra, the people who had gathered in the square in Jerusalem realized how many of those terrible prophecies from the days of Moses—1000 years earlier—had actually already taken place.
8. Why do you suppose the people came, at that point in time, anxious to hear about the Word of God? Did most of them know about Ezra's work? Were there rumors going around about what Ezra had discovered in the books of Moses?
9. Read Nehemiah 8:4-8. A platform was built so that Ezra and his assistants could stand up high enough for everyone to see them. Thirteen men stood with Ezra during the reading. Perhaps they were responsible for holding and rolling the scrolls so Ezra could read. Or, perhaps, some of them did a portion of the reading. Another thirteen men translated and explained the passages. (Nehemiah 8:7-8) Remember that with the Babylonian captivity, Aramaic had become the native language of the Jewish people. While Hebrew and Aramaic are closely related, they are not the same. So, very few people could immediately understand the Hebrew as it was read. Thus, it was that God arranged with the help of Ezra for the Scriptures to be translated and explained in Aramaic.

Nehemiah 8:8: They gave an oral translation of God's law and explained it so that the people could understand it.—*Good News Bible*.*

10. **This was the first modern language translation known in history.** Modern language translations are approved of God, and they cause rejoicing in heaven if they are done according to God's will. **God wants us to understand His Word in a language that is familiar to us.**

Joshua 1:8: "Be sure that the book of the Law is always read in your worship. Study it day and night, and make sure that you obey everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."—*Good News Bible*.* [Were they to memorize it?]*†

Deuteronomy 17:18-19: [Predictions for a future king for Israel:] ¹⁸ "When he becomes king, he is to have a copy of the book of God's laws and teachings made from the

original copy kept by the levitical priests. ¹⁹**He is to keep this book near him and read from it all his life, so that he will learn to honour the LORD and to obey faithfully everything that is commanded in it.**—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

John 5:39-40: ³⁹ “You study the Scriptures, because you think that in them you will find eternal life. And these very Scriptures speak about me! ⁴⁰Yet you are not willing to come to me in order to have life.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*}

11. When Ezra and the priests called the people together to listen to the reading of the Word, it is important to notice that **they called together those who were able to understand**. This is a clear indication of the purpose of the reading. **He wanted everyone to listen and understand!**
12. There are many passages in Scripture that encourage us to read and understand the Word of God. Deuteronomy 4:1; 6:3-4; Joshua 1:9; Psalm 1:2; Proverbs 19:20; Ezekiel 37:4; and Matthew 17:5 are just a few examples.
13. Read Acts 8:26-38, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. This is another example of a time when God miraculously arranged for someone to be present and translate and explain God’s Word to an earnest seeker for the truth.
14. Protestants are known for their belief that individual believers are the ones who will, one day, be saved. But, this does not exclude the possibility that someone else could help us to understand what we are reading. Shouldn’t we be studying the Bible through book-by-book together?
15. What difference would it make in the lives of Seventh-day Adventists today if they really had an earnest desire to read and understand all the implications of God’s Word? That would include an understanding of the great controversy over God’s character and government which is the key to understanding many difficult passages in Scripture.
16. Read **Nehemiah 8:5-6**. Imagine the enormous group of people first hearing the reading of God’s Word and responding with: “Amen, Amen!” and then bowing down with their faces to the ground.

Nehemiah 8:9-12: ⁹ When the people heard what the Law required, they were so moved that they began to cry. So Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law, and the Levites who were explaining the Law told all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God, so you are not to mourn or cry. ¹⁰Now go home and have a feast. Share your food and wine with those who haven’t enough. Today is holy to our Lord, so don’t be sad. **The joy that the LORD gives you will make you strong.**”

¹¹ The Levites went about calming the people and telling them not to be sad on such a holy day. ¹²So all the people went home and ate and drank joyfully and shared what they had with others, because they understood what had been read to them.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

So, in later years, when the law of God was read in Jerusalem to the captives returned from Babylon, and the people wept because of their transgressions, the gracious words were spoken:

“Mourn not.... Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Nehemiah 8:9, 10.—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing** 281.6-7.

17. If you had recently returned from the experience of living as a slave in a foreign land, how would you have felt about reading the history of the Jewish people for the first time. No doubt, they were all familiar with a few of the common stories. But, reading the details must have had an enormous impact on them. They began to weep. Remember that they had just completed building the wall. Now, on this special day known as the Feast of Trumpets or *Rosh Hashanah*, they were supposed to begin preparation of their hearts for the Day of Atonement to come 10 days later. But, that was not the whole story. An enormous revival had taken place among the

people; and with God's help, they had rebuilt the wall. Surely, it was time to rejoice in the Lord. They gathered to hear Ezra read from the Scriptures every day for a week.

18. Do we have reasons to rejoice in the Lord in our day?
19. Read **Nehemiah 8:13-18**. From the reading, they realized that they were supposed to be celebrating those three important festivals. For the first time since the days of Joshua the son of Nun, they gathered branches from various trees to form small enclosures in which they could live for one week, reminding them of the exodus from Egypt.
20. Leviticus 23:39-43 explains what they were supposed to do during the Feast of Tabernacles also known as the Feast of Tents or Feast of Booths. Try to imagine what it would have been like to be a part of that original "camp meeting."
21. Seventh-day Adventists used to hold camp meetings regularly in many different places. It is now a custom that has fallen somewhat out of use. But, surely, if anyone has a reason to celebrate, we do. What God has promised us is beyond our wildest imaginations!

Isaiah 64:4: ⁴No one has ever seen or heard of a God like you, who does such deeds for those who put their hope in him.—*Good News Bible*.*

1 Corinthians 2:9: ⁹However, as the scripture says:

"What no one ever saw or heard,
what no one ever thought could happen,
is the very thing God prepared for those who love him."—*Good News Bible*.*

22. What did the death of Jesus on the cross do about sin? Did it assuage the wrath of an angry God? What would that mean? The death of Jesus on the cross was for the benefit of the entire universe, most of whom have never sinned. What did the death of Jesus on the cross do for them?

Ephesians 1:8-10: In all his wisdom and insight ⁹God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ. ¹⁰This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is **to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.**—*Good News Bible*.*[†]

Ephesians 3:8-10: ⁸I am less than the least of all God's people; yet God gave me this privilege of taking to the Gentiles the Good News about the infinite riches of Christ, ⁹and of making all people see how God's secret plan is to be put into effect. God, who is the Creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, ¹⁰in order that **at the present time, by means of the church, the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms.**—*Good News Bible*.*[†]

Colossians 1:19-20: ¹⁹For it was by God's own decision that the Son has in himself the full nature of God. ²⁰**Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's blood on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.**—*Good News Bible*.*[†]

Through the plan of salvation, a larger purpose is to be wrought out even than the salvation of man and the redemption of the earth.—Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times*,* February 13, 1893, par. 12; *Ibid.*,* December 22, 1914, par. 4; *The Messenger*,* June 7, 1893, par. 5; *Bible Echoes*,* July 15, 1893, par. 3; *That I May Know Him** 366.4.[†]

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law

of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe. To this result of His great sacrifice—its influence upon the intelligences of other worlds, as well as upon man—the Saviour looked forward when just before His crucifixion He said: “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me.” John 12:31, 32. The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan. It would establish the perpetuity of the law of God and would reveal the nature and the results of sin.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 68.2-69.0 (1890); *Reflecting Christ** 50.3 (1985).†

23. Remember that for the Christian the ultimate reward will be in heaven. No matter what we have to go through on this earth before we get to that point, we have a guaranteed future. So, what is *the joy of the Lord*?

Luke 15:7,10: ⁷ “In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people [Pharisees and Sadducees?] who do not need to repent.... ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents.”—*Good News Bible*.*†

24. If one sinner who repents causes joy in heaven, what do you suppose the response in heaven was when the entire group of returnees enthusiastically turned back to the Lord?
25. The children of Israel had realized that they needed to repent and, once again, follow God. But, that did not result in a long period of mourning! God’s forgiveness was immediate and bountiful. In fact, God is forgiveness personified. He even forgave the men who were nailing Him to the cross! (Luke 23:34)

Now they must manifest faith in His promises. God had accepted their repentance; they were now to rejoice in the assurance of sins forgiven and their restoration to divine favor....

Every true turning to the Lord brings abiding joy into the life. When a sinner yields to the influence of the Holy Spirit, he sees his own guilt and defilement in contrast with the holiness of the great Searcher of hearts.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 667.3-668.3.†

26. Would studying God’s Word until we clearly develop a close relationship with God and understand the basic tenets of salvation bring rejoicing? It should! But, does it seem like a contradiction of sorts that we are supposed to mourn for our sins, and yet, rejoice in the Lord? See Romans 3:19-24.
27. But, it is very important to recognize that after Paul concluded that in his own natural condition, every single human being is a sinner and far away from God’s saving presence. **The next two verses in Romans 3 are the only direct explanation in the entire Bible of why Jesus had to die.**

Romans 3:25-26: ²⁵⁻²⁶ God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him. God did this **in order to demonstrate that he is righteous.** In the past he was patient and overlooked people’s sins; but in the present time he deals with their sins, **in order to demonstrate his righteousness.** In this way **God shows that he himself is righteous** and that he puts right everyone who believes in Jesus.—*Good News Bible*.*†

28. We have every reason to rejoice in the Lord because even in this life the Christian way of life is better and healthier—both physically and spiritually—than living according to the world’s ways.
29. Scan Nehemiah 8-10 in your favorite version. It is interesting to notice that Ezra and Nehemiah are mentioned together only twice in the book of Nehemiah: (1) In Nehemiah 8:9, and (2) In

Nehemiah 12:26. Nehemiah 8-10 is written from a third-person point of view instead of a first-person perspective. Perhaps, this was because it was intended to be read and discussed and understood repeatedly by the children of Israel following this experience. Ezra was mentioned because while he may not have had a major role in the rebuilding of the structures of the temple or the wall, he certainly was a major figure in the reading of Scripture, the confession of sins, and the renewal of their covenant with God. Nehemiah 8 is almost unique in its emphasis on understanding. The word *bin*, “to understand,” is repeated six times, (See Nehemiah 8:2,3,7,8,9,12.) and it is not the only word emphasizing understanding. There is also the word *sakhal* which is used twice to mean “understanding,” to be “wise and prudent,” “to have understanding, wisdom, and discretion.” (Nehemiah 8:8,13)

30. It is very important to recognize that, most of all, God wants us not only to read His Book, but also to understand what we are reading and the implications of those words. Understanding the words led the people assembled on that special day to weep. How does the reading of God’s Word affect us? God is pleading with us to come back to Him, to work with Him, and to finish the gospel so that the whole sin-experience can come to an end. Time in reading God’s Word is intended to lead to personal and corporate revival.
31. The leaders did everything they could to make the reading of God’s Word as meaningful as possible for the people.
32. It is important at this point to recognize that it was not just repentance that all of heaven was rejoicing about; but also humans were to understand the plan of salvation.
33. A correct understanding of the great controversy and how God has won the great controversy is worth rejoicing about for the rest of eternity.

That which alone can effectually restrain from sin in this world of darkness, will prevent sin in heaven. The significance of the death of Christ will be seen by saints and angels. Fallen men could not have a home in the paradise of God without the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Shall we not then exalt the cross of Christ? **The angels ascribe honor and glory to Christ, for even they are not secure except by looking to the sufferings of the Son of God. It is through the efficacy of the cross that the angels of heaven are guarded from apostasy. Without the cross they would be no more secure against evil than were the angels before the fall of Satan. Angelic perfection failed in heaven. Human perfection failed in Eden, the paradise of bliss.**—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*,* December 30, 1889, par. 4.† Compare *OHC* 45.4-5; *5SDABC* 1132.9; *TA* 205.3-206.1.

34. Do we think about everything that happens to us in light of our relationship to God and our future home? Viktor E. Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and an Austrian psychologist, wrote:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”—*Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 104.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 84].‡

35. Do you agree with this statement?
36. It was God’s original purpose for the children of Israel to represent Him correctly before the surrounding nations. This story of the rebuilding of the wall and the reading of God’s Word in a language the people could understand was one occasion when that actually happened! How has an understanding of the deeper meanings of Scripture impacted your life?

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