



## WORKING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

### Studies in Nehemiah

### Lesson 5

## THE WORD OF GOD IS LIVING AND POWERFUL!

### Nehemiah 8

Nehemiah has now led the Returnees in the successful completion of the wall. He assigned two faithful men - his brother, Hanani, and another man named, Hanaiah - to take charge of the military and security operations in Jerusalem (7:1-3). He completed a careful census to discover who had actually returned from exile and to certify the priesthood.

It is at this point that Ezra, a priest and scribe, once again emerges upon the scene. Nehemiah did not mention Ezra earlier in this book; however, now we learn that he was still active in Jerusalem as a contemporary and fellow leader of the Returnees along with Nehemiah. As the most important scribe in Israel at this time, as well as a priest, he led the people by reading the covenant to them (v. 3).

Ezra had returned to Jerusalem some 14 years before Nehemiah (Ezra 7:11-28). His primary purpose was to teach the children of Israel the Law of God. Nehemiah would probably have been the first to acknowledge that his own success in Jerusalem was largely due to Ezra's earlier diligent and faithful ministry among the people of Israel.

The moral and spiritual condition of the people was deplorable when Ezra first came to Jerusalem. And though there was still much to be done the people gradually responded in obedience to the laws of God. Ezra's successful work is also reflected in the behavior of the people once the walls were completed. They themselves asked Ezra to continue his teaching ministry among them (Nehemiah 8:1).

We do not know how many days and weeks, perhaps even months, Ezra prayed and wept before God for the returned Israel. He must have been delighted when they called for him to read from the Law of God.

#### I. **DESIRE FOR GOD'S WORD NEHEMIAH 8:1-5**

The sequence in chapter 8 is striking: intellectual response to the Word (1-8), emotional response to the Word (9-12), and volitional response to the Word. The Word of God had a tremendous impact on the Returnees. It pointed the people to their sin (8:9), led them to worship (8:12, 14), and gave them great joy (8:17).

##### **A. The Reading of the Word**

The Mosaic Law specified that once every seven years the people of Israel were to assemble and listen to the reading of the Law. This was to take place during the Feast of Booths (also called Tabernacles, Deuteronomy 31:10-13). This occasion provided an opportunity for the people to renew their commitment to Jehovah and His Law.

We are not told exactly how Ezra and the Levites read and explained God's law to this large crowd (it may have numbered somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 people (see 7:66, 67)). It may be that Ezra read the sections of the law in the presence of all the people (8:3). Then at certain points the Levites must have circulated out among the people and interpreted and explained what Ezra had read as the people gathered in small groups, perhaps divided down by households (8:7,

8). Ezra undoubtedly read from the Hebrew scrolls but many people were no longer fluent in Hebrew because of the influence of the Babylonian culture. This would especially be true of the younger generation. And intermarriage with various non-Jewish groups undoubtedly accentuated the problem of communication (see Nehemiah 13:24).

### **B. Reflective of the Synagogue Service Developed in Exile**

This ceremony may reflect the form of Israelite worship that had developed in exile. Almost the same elements that characterized the synagogue services begun then appear here. The people assembled, there was a request for the reading of the Torah, someone opened the scroll, and the people stood. Then someone (Ezra) offered praise, the people responded, and they received instruction (a sermon). Finally the law was read, an oral explanation and exhortation followed, and the people departed for a fellowship meal.

### **C. The Seventh Month**

The "first day of the seventh month" (v. 2) was the day on which the Israelites were to observe the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:24). The priests blew trumpets to assemble the people, to announce God's working among them, and to signal preparation for the Day of Atonement, which followed on the tenth of the month (Leviticus 23:27). This time the people gathered at an appropriate place near the Water Gate (v.1). This gate was on the east side of the city of David, and it was near the Gihon Spring.

### **D. Ezra and "The Book of the Law"**

Many have suggested that "the book of the Law of Moses" (v. 1) refers to the legal material in the Pentateuch, or the "priestly code" (i.e., Leviticus), or the Deuteronomic laws, or the entire Pentateuch (i.e., the Torah). The fact is that we just do not know nor can we know for certain at this time. We do know, however, that the book was a scroll since codices (books as we know them) did not become popular until the early Christian centuries.

Evidently a wooden podium accommodated Israel's leaders who stood on this raised platform with Ezra (v. 4).

### **E. The Attitude of the People**

Even though Ezra apparently read for several hours the people remained attentive. This attitude and their standing on their feet because they respected the Law shows the commitment of these obedient Jews to the Word (vs. 3, 5).

Lifting up the hands toward heaven, normally with palms upward, was a common way in which the Jews expressed their desire to receive a blessing from God. Bowing with faces to the ground, a posture Muslims still observe, reflected their sense of humility before God. This is how slaves bowed before their masters in the ancient world.

### **F. Translating and Interpreting the Law**

Nehemiah 8:8 says, "*They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read*" (NIV). They spoke the message of God in a language they could understand. The people had grown up in captivity in a foreign country. They had adapted by learning the language of the land of their captivity. They did not under-

stand the Hebrew language in which the Law of Moses was written. They needed interpreters to make the message distinctive, understandable and relevant.

Not only did the leaders read the Word of God, they also translated it from the Hebrew language into Aramaic, the common language of the Persian Empire. The written translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, with comments added, was the Targum (literally “translation”). The Apostle Paul referred to himself as a Hebrew (Philippians 3:5). He meant that he was a Jew who could read the Jewish Bible in the original Hebrew language, not just in Aramaic. Ezra and his associates not only translated the Law, they also explained what it meant, and how it applied to the people. This is Bible exposition.

## II. CELEBRATION OF GOD'S WORD NEHEMIAH 8:9-12

### A. Conviction

Conviction of their departure from God's will fell on the people as they heard the Law read. Their initial reaction was to mourn and weep (v. 9).

### B. Consolation

However the Law specified that the Feast of Trumpets was to be a joyous occasion, so Nehemiah urged them to rejoice in the Lord (v. 10). This joy, as they thought about Yahweh, would strengthen and sustain them as a tonic. Since the Law forbade eating fat, Nehemiah probably meant that the people should eat and drink food appropriate at such a joyous feast (v. 10).

Here you have the real purpose of the Word of God – it taught the Israelites God's will, convicted them of their short-comings, corrected their conduct, and fitted them for righteous living (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16).

## III. OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD - CELEBRATION OF THE FEAST OF BOOTHS NEHEMIAH 8:13-18

### A. The Desire to Know More

As the leaders in Israel learned more of God's will for their lives they discovered that the Lord had designed a special experience for all of them that were to take place during the feast of Tabernacles.

Note that the spiritually revived people had an insatiable appetite to learn more about God's Word. This is a normal outcome of true revival.

### B. The Discovery and Celebration of the Feast

Nehemiah did not record whether the people also observed the Day of Atonement that fell on the tenth of the same month. Probably they did since they were restoring the other Israelite institutions. It was the only festival wherein the people afflicted themselves in repentance for their sins and fasted.

Apparently part of what Ezra and his associates read to the people, or at least to the leaders, included Leviticus 23 (Nehemiah 8:13). In Leviticus 23, God called on the Jews to observe the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) on the fifteenth through the twenty-first days of the seventh month (Leviticus 23:34-36).

### C. The Meaning of the Celebration

This was a happy celebration that looked back to the Israelites' years of wandering in the wilderness when they lived in booths that they made out of branches. It also looked forward to their entrance into and permanent residence in the Promised Land. Consequently it would have had special significance for the returned

exiles who now again had entered into the Promised Land after being absent from it for years. They had come through a kind of wilderness experience themselves.

#### **D. The Most Festive of Celebrations**

The returnees had observed the Feast of Tabernacles previously (Ezra 3:4). However the present celebration was the most festive one since Joshua had brought the Israelites into the Promised Land for the first time (v. 17).

God had made that day a holy day. God marked that day off in a special way.

God wanted to be remembered not just for judgment but also for grace and mercy.

God wanted them to be more aware of His strength than their weaknesses.

God wanted them to be instilled with the joy of His presence rather than lingering on in a sense of shame.

God wanted them to know what a wonderful thing it was to gain insight into God's Word so that they could obey rather than just to sob over how they have disobeyed.

Simply put, they were to celebrate. And so the festival went on. God wanted to have a happy people. Happy are those who know their sins are forgiven! Anytime God comes and reveals Himself in special ways, we should celebrate. Even as God's people, we can see we do not desire Him as we ought. We are not thankful as we should be. We are easily distracted. But God doesn't want us weeping all our days. The point of grief is for recognition of wrong doing and the deciding to do right. This is a time of joy when He reveals His Word to us.

They never kept this feast so joyfully, having not only the same causes of rejoicing which they formerly had, but special causes to increase their joy. They never kept it so solemnly and religiously. At other times, only the first and last day of that feast were celebrated with a holy convocation; now there was a holy convocation, an assembly, and the reading of the law every day of this feast.

## **CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION**

### **God Met Them In His Word.**

God is rich in grace and man great in his sin. The Returnees might have started looking good and ordered in their city walls, but this did not mean they were right in spirit. God had to do a special work within His people to create the inner soul of the city. This is what He does when He causes us to become Christians. We are born from above. We are made a new creation. The old has passed away; the new has come. He visits His people in special ways in our lives to accomplish His glorious purposes.

They did not deserve this special visit. Note their sins. But neither do we deserve such a visit. But may God revive us just the same. May God come to us as He came to them at the Water Gate. May the rivers of life be poured forth upon us with a stream so mighty and strong, so clean and pure, that we would weep over our sins to such a degree we need to be reminded that it is also a day of great grace.

During the French Revolution many leaders were determined to do away with Christianity forever. One lovely, clear night an atheist boastfully proclaimed his satanic doctrine to a poor countryman. "Everything," he ranted, "will be abolished-- churches, Bibles, clergymen. Yes, even the word 'God' itself! We shall remove everything that speaks of religion." The listener gave a quiet chuckle. "Why do you laugh?" demanded the other. The peasant pointed to the stars and replied, "I

was just wondering how you and your crew would manage to get them down!"

Nothing prepares us to read the Word of God better than an appreciation of His sovereignty. As they looked at the heavens they realized God's sovereignty. It demanded a great respect for the Word of God that is about to be read. There is such a profound respect for God and His Word here. It is through this profound respect that the people begin to realize the personal presence of God.

### **Ezra Read from the Book of the Law of God Distinctly.**

The priests went through the crowds giving the sense of the message. The Bible has meaning, and it has a distinct message for our lives. There is absolutely no doubt that they saw the relevancy of the message to their lives because they are presently experiencing the fulfillment of God's promises to them. God's Word begins to make sense to them, for they see themselves in it.

As we study the Bible we can see God's concern and care for His people. They found that Jeremiah had prophesied the very destruction that the Israelites were now suffering as they read the book of Nehemiah. Yet, in the same breath Jeremiah gives them a promise that their mourning will turn to a morning of joy. He promises to bring them from the land of captivity and he describes how they will return.

*Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither.*

*They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.... Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. (Jeremiah 31:8-9, 16)*

What a relevant message of care and hope God's Word reveals. The book of Nehemiah reveals the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophesy. God is leading them with supplications. That means He is caring for them. He is causing them to walk by rivers of water in a straight way and they are not stumbling. That means that God is sustaining them for He is their Father. The Israelites are experiencing the joyous realities of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. They are experiencing the relevancy of the message.

### **They Listened from Early Morning till Midday.**

I wonder how many times people have complained about long meetings? In how many council meetings has this discussion come up? Part of it is trying to understand the people but more than anything it is the grand confession of our hearts that do not long for God's Word. We don't have chairs so we buy chairs or pews. We don't have cushions, so we buy cushions. But here they met from early morning to midday with a minimum of 4 hours. I know that you are probably thinking that these people did not have jobs and school pressures that we do. But these thoughts really cover over the true longings of our hearts. We just do not want to admit even if we had time, we would not want to hear God's Word.

In fact you do have time. We have more free time than many generations before this. We can criticize and say that a longer service is not any more spiritual

than a short one; a longer sermon is not more spiritual than a short one. Of course a long service does not prove anything. This is not what is even being discussed here. It was long because the people wanted it long. They longed to be in the House of the Lord.

### **They Had an Attitude of Attentiveness to the Word.**

This brings us to the attitude of the believers. The people were attentive to the book of the law. Now they did have language problems. They were not learned people. They could for the most part not read the Hebrew. But they had this for them. They wanted to learn. They were attentive. When you are thinking about what you need to prepare for a meal tomorrow or how you are going to finish off that report you are not being attentive to God's Word. These people stood for hours just to hear God's Word and they were paying attention. I believe that we evangelicals have the same problem with the liberals, except they are more honest. We have dead hearts. We do not really care or believe God's Word is relevant to us. The liberals confessed this openly, changed their doctrine and started discussing social issues. We just do not really take God's Word seriously.

### **They Had Great Respect for God's Word.**

They had great respect for God's Word. To be sure, this was a special occasion. They had finished the wall and organized the people. But something else was being done here. The people's hearts were being reformed by the Word of God. There was the scribe, Ezra, standing up at the wooden pulpit they made for the occasion. Six on his right hand; seven stood on his left. He was higher not only so that people could see but also so that people could hear.

Most interesting is that when the word of God was opened, the people stood. These people did not have chairs; they probably just had a blanket or flat rock to sit on. However, when the scrolls were opened, when he opened the book, the people stood up. They respected God's Word. They could sense the presence of God. They knew that God was speaking.

### **"The joy of the Lord is your strength."**

This phrase is pregnant with meaning. It cuts like a two edged sword. It is the Lord's joy that is our strength. It is His rejoicing that gives reason to rejoice. It is His joy that fills us with hope. It is His joyous wish to save me just as I am, in spite of all my sins. It is God's joy to stand me back upon my feet and strengthen my feeble legs and wobbly knees so that I might discover His joy as my strength. It is truly a sacred day in heaven when a sinner discovers that *"the joy of the Lord is his strength."*

*"The joy of the Lord"* remains our strength today. His faithfulness continues throughout all generations. For His kingdom extends from generation to generation. Today we see God from a much different vantage point. But He is still the same faithful God. As we look back to Abraham from the cross, we see God's continued faithfulness to the promise He made to Abraham. Today that same God seeks to bless all men through Jesus Christ, the seed of promise to Abraham. He seeks to fulfill the promise He made to Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through his seed.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Read Lesson 5 and share a time when the Word of God became very precious to you.

**Read Nehemiah chapter 9**

2. Note that the time frame is about three weeks after the first reading of the Law and 2 days after the Celebration (or solemn) assembly. Why do you think they were wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads?
3. How long did they read the Law and how long did they worship?
4. Why do you think they spent so much time confessing the sins of their ancestors?
5. The prayer of verses 5-38 is one of the most elegant recitals of God's marvelous acts in Israel's history. It is intended to instruct the readers. It gives us a survey of the history of Israel with emphasis on certain events in the life of the Chosen People. Give a name to the four parts of the Psalm:
  - a. vs. 5-6 –
  - b. vs. 7-31 –
  - c. vs. 32-35 –
  - d. vs. 36-37 –
6. In what sense were they servants? 9:36-37.
7. With what action does the Psalm end?
8. Why do you think it is so hard to pray?
9. List the attributes of God that you find in this psalm and give the verses (e.g. "merciful" in v. 31 (twice)).