

A Sure Foundation

The Word of God is the foundation for any great movement of God.



GOD'S STORY
THE TRANSFORMATION FOR ADULT LIFEGROUPS

Nehemiah 8:1-12

September 27, 2020

(Nehemiah 8:1-12) ¹And all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. ²So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. ⁴Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. ⁵Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. ⁹Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." ¹¹The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve." ¹²Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

COMMUNITY – CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

- **When was a time you sensed God leading you in a new direction in your life?**
- **How did you respond to this prompting?**
- **The main point for today's lesson is: The Word of God is the foundation for any great movement of God. Have you ever tried to make a change or be part of something big without God's Word as the foundation? What happened?**

God's commands were the spiritual foundation for Jerusalem. The walls were up, the doors securely hung, people were finding their way back into the city, and the surviving remnant who'd never left were renewed with the hope of a better future. Jerusalem was beginning to look and feel like a real city again, but for a truly great movement of God to take place, the most important part was missing—it was time for God's Word to be reintroduced in Jerusalem's society.

CONTENT – EXPLORING GOD'S STORY

Have a volunteer read Nehemiah 8:1-8

- **How did the Jews respond to the reading of the law? Why do you think the Jews were willing to listen to the reading of the law for several hours?**
- **Look again at verses 5-6. Compare the people's response to God's Word with the average church congregation's response. What do you think made the difference?**

In Nehemiah 8, the Israelites "listened attentively" to the Book of the Law (Genesis–Deuteronomy) for about six hours, from morning to noon. One of the main reasons they were so attentive is because they did not have personal access to the Word of God. Just imagine if our church decided to meet for six

six hours this Sunday? To us, that might seem like a long time to listen to Scripture reading. But during the days of Nehemiah, the Jewish exiles couldn't get enough of it.

- **How does our view of Scripture affect our desire to read and listen to the Bible?**
- **Why is it important that believers today read the Word of God both alone and together?**

The reading of God's Word reminds us of God's eternal character. It reminds us how we, like the returning exiles, are given the choice either to obey or disobey God. Through the reading of God's Word, we are reminded of our heritage—where we came from and who we are. We are reminded of God's faithfulness to our ancestors and His mighty acts of restoration. But most of all, through the reading of God's Word, we are reminded that God has a master plan, a mission to restore what His people lost—through the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

In this Word we are enabled to understand the character of and to actually meet the Word made flesh, the One who was there from the beginning, who was promised, and who came, according to God's Word (John 1:1-2, 14).

In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, bowing and kneeling were signs of reverence. This was a way to put someone or something above one's self. That's exactly what the returning Jewish exiles did in Nehemiah 8. They understood that posture mattered. So when the Scripture was read, they stood to their feet in attention. Standing for the reading of Scripture was not uncommon in those days (see 9:3). And after the exiles stood for six hours, they all bowed with their faces to the ground to worship God.

- **What are some ways we might demonstrate reverence for God's Word today?**

Have a volunteer read Nehemiah 8:9-12

- **What was the Israelites' response when they heard the words of the law Ezra read?**
- **How did Nehemiah redirect the people's response? What did they do?**

With the words "Do not mourn or weep," the leaders stressed the importance of joyous celebration. The people grieved as they heard the Law read. Although sorrow and repentance are proper responses to hearing God's Word, the leaders did not want the people to miss the joy that should also result.

- **Why did the leaders direct the people from sorrow to joy? How does the joy God gives differ from the world's concept of happiness?**

COMMISSION – ENGAGING IN GOD'S STORY

- **When have you recently been affected or convicted by your study of God's Word?**
- **Do you read the Bible every day? If so, how does it alter your day? If not, how might you make it a habit?**
- **Is there a particular area of your life where the Word of God doesn't seem to relate? What do you need to do to find out how God's Word matters in this area?**

PRAYER: Thank God for the validity of Scripture as the primary tool of any meaningful growth and movement in your life and in the world. Thank God for the pastors, leaders and volunteers who teach God's Word each week so we are equipped to love God and evangelize the world. Ask God to help you look to His Word and respond to it in obedient faith and fervent worship.

CONTINUE TO JOURNEY THROUGH GOD'S STORY

Bible Reading Plan:

DAY 1 – Nehemiah 13
DAY 2 – Malachi 1
DAY 3 – Malachi 2
DAY 4 – Malachi 3
DAY 5 – Malachi 4

KEY VERSE: Malachi 3:10

H.E.A.R. Method:

Highlight a verse or two.
Explain what the text means.
Apply the verse to your life.
Respond to God.

Our team has put together Bible study resources to encourage and inspire you as you engage in God's Story.
Visit chetscreek.com/gods-story for videos, study guides, and more.

OUR VISION

To be a church
for the unchurched,
here and around the world.

ADULT LIFEGROUPS

Gospel-centered communities that aim to KNOW
GOD together and BE CHANGED by Him in a
way that will CHANGE THE WORLD.

8:1. The "people" dominate these verses. The word "people" occurs thirteen times in 8:1–12. The phrase "all the people" occurs in nine of those instances. The most important character in this section is the people. The character Ezra functions here only for the purpose of reading the book to them.

Just as these people took the initiative, we should encourage all Christian believers to take the initiative in seeking spiritual revival. The people already respected the law of Moses and recognized its authority for their community. It is significant that this reading of the law and the worship service were not centered in the temple and not controlled by the priesthood. From this time on in Judaism, the Torah was more important than the temple. Likewise, for Christians, the living power of the Bible should be more important than any church building. Through Scripture the Holy Spirit brings people to abundant life.

8:2. "Men and women and all who were able to understand" involved the entire community, including young people and children. The Jews became known as "the people of the book." The Old Testament emphasizes that God's Word is to be known and used by all the people, not only the priests and leaders. Early Christians adopted this same principle. This changed as time went on as fewer and fewer people had access to the Bible. The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on sola scriptura (on the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice) returned to the biblical principle that every believer should read Scripture as God's Word for their lives.

8:3. It is not stated why Ezra chose to have this assembly and reading of the Law at the Water Gate rather than at the temple. Some speculate that tension between Nehemiah and the priests, some of whom were allied with Tobiah the Ammonite (6:17-19), may have encouraged Ezra and Nehemiah to have the meeting away from the temple complex. It is possible that the size of the crowd demanded a different location. Exactly what made up the book of the law has been the subject of intense discussion. Probably Ezra read the legal sections of a Pentateuch that was virtually identical to what we have today. It does not say that he read it in its entirety, but that he read out of it.

8:4. The term "platform" normally means "tower," but it is used to designate a platform here and in 2 Chron. 6:13. Little is known about the men who stood on his right and his left. Usually in Ezra-Nehemiah priests and Levites are distinguished from the "laity," so these people probably were prominent lay leaders, such as representatives from the elders or heads of families.

8:5-6. The phrase "Ezra opened the book" is a little anachronistic since the book did not appear until the Christian era. Literally the phrase is, "Ezra unrolled the scroll." The apostle Paul specifically instructed that "Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13). Worship for the people was not just a mental exercise, but it involved the whole worshiper, who stood, spoke, and knelt in humility before God.

8:9. This verse is important because it links the ministries of Nehemiah and Ezra. Many critical scholars regard the mention of these great leaders together as an anachronistic attempt to link together the ministries of two men who, according to these scholars, were not contemporaries. Yet there are no insurmountable problems, either textually or historically, that preclude the historicity of this event. Admittedly it seems odd that Nehemiah makes no mention of Ezra, a man of such prominence, until this point in the narrative. This does not necessarily mean that Ezra was not there. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries who both prophesied to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, yet neither mentions the other. Here the author clearly attests to a joint ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, who participated together in the covenant renewal (chaps. 8–10) and took part together in the great procession and dedication of the walls of Jerusalem (12:27-43). The command, "Do not mourn or weep," seems baffling since the leaders would have been encouraged by the contrition and repentance of the people. However, this dedication of the wall occurred on the "first day of the seventh month" (v. 2) during the New Year celebration. The feast days were to be days of joy (Lev. 23:24; Deut. 12:12; 16:11), not mourning.

8:10. Rather than mourning, the people were commanded to go and "eat what is rich, drink what is sweet." The term "rich" translates a Hebrew word found in the Old Testament only here in this verse but clearly related to the verb "to make fat, to be fat." It refers to choice foods appropriate for a celebration. The "sweet" drink mentioned

here may have been wine mixed with honey, a popular drink long before the time of Christ. The people were to stop grieving because their strength came from the joy of the Lord . True security was found in Yahweh alone.

8:10–11. The Hebrew text of v. 10 begins, like v. 9, with the singular verb “said.” It has no subject specified, however. The NIV has supplied “Nehemiah” on the assumption that he is the one speaking. Some think the subject here could be Ezra. In either case, the leaders wanted the people to rejoice and enjoy a fellowship meal.

The peace offering, or fellowship offering, explained in Lev 3 was often accompanied by a meal. Most of the meat of the offering was eaten by the one who offered the sacrifice. The peace offering, or fellowship offering, is mentioned together with feasting in 2 Sam 6:18–19; 1 Chr 29:22; 2 Chr 30:21–26. Here, too, there may have been a combination of fellowship offering and fellowship meal. Some must have prepared it, but they were to share with those who did not have it prepared, perhaps in some cases because they were too poor. The day was “sacred” and deserved to be celebrated. God calls his people to the celebration of new life (Luke 19:1–10). One’s faith is optimistic because of God’s power. Real joy is an expression of faith in what God can do and is doing.

8:12 What a difference it makes when God’s people “understand” God’s Word and apply it to their particular situations. Allowing the use of the Bible to become routine and ritualistic is a violation of its nature and message. The prophet Hosea said to those who were supposed to teach Scripture to God’s people, “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6; Mal 2:1–9). The biblical text needs to be applied by each generation and in each situation without falling into legalism or accepting a syncretism in which one loses the Scripture’s authority and distinctive message. Jesus used the same Old Testament Scriptures as the Pharisees, but the people listened with attention and marveled because he taught with authority (Matt 7:29).