

Spiritual Rejuvenation starts with getting Back to the Word

Aim: To show from the book of Nehemiah that when we want to rejuvenate God's people into serving the Lord, we need to start by getting them back to the Word of God.¹

Reading: **Nehemiah 8:1-10** *Ezra reading the Book of Law to the assembled*

Introduction:

To put the reading into context.....

Around 150 years prior to the events in **Nehemiah 8**, Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem (around 587BC), and most of the survivors from Judah had been taken away captive to Babylon (**2 Kings 25:1-21**).

Note: The destruction of Jerusalem was not a case of God not being able to defend His people. It was a case of God fulfilling what He prophesied in **Deuteronomy 28:15, 36-37** about what would happen to His people if they did not give heed to His Word (**Deuteronomy 28:45**).

After 70 years of the captivity, the Babylonians were over-run by the Medes and Persians (**Daniel 5:25-31**), and this new administration allowed the children of Israel to return to Jerusalem (**Ezra 1:1-6**). This returning to Jerusalem was also in keeping with what God had foretold via the prophet Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 25:11-13**. - the Lord always keeps His Word.

After the people had returned to Jerusalem, the Temple was eventually restored (**Ezra 6:15-16**), and, despite some opposition from other peoples in the area, the city walls had also been rebuilt, (**Nehemiah 2:11 – 6:16**).

Having taken care of the physical things in the city, there was also the need to take care of the spiritual things. Given their nation's past history of unfaithfulness (**Nehemiah 9:16-35**), it was time for the people to get their lives back in harmony with God and His Word. It was a time of spiritual renewal.

When we get to **Nehemiah 8**, it is the 7th month of the year (**Nehemiah 7:73b**), and all of the people have gathered together in Jerusalem near the Water Gate (**Nehemiah 8:1**). This gate was located on the south-eastern side of the city². Being the 7th month, it was almost time for the Feast of Tabernacles (**Leviticus 23:34-43**). This was a feast that was to be kept for 7 days each year (**Deuteronomy 16:13-16**) to remind the children of Israel that their ancestors had dwelt in booths when God had brought them out of the land of Egypt (**Leviticus 23:43**).

From the reading, we see that the people had gathered near the Water Gate to hear the Word of the Lord. As we look at these verses, and also the rest of the verses in the chapter, I want us to consider their attitude towards God's Word, and then make some application for us from their example.

¹ Acknowledgements to Bill Watkins, Crieve Hall, Nashville, TN, for the basic outline of this lesson.

² The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 3, H-L, page 479

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LESSON

1) They had a hunger for the Word of God

- a) **Nehemiah 8:1** “Now all the people gathered together...and **they told** Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses....”³ (emphasis mine – SK)

This wasn't a case of Ezra the scribe telling the people to “*come together because there are some things you need to hear from God's Word*”. Rather, it was the people who told Ezra to bring the Word so that they could hear it. They, the people, wanted to hear it. They had a hunger for it. They wanted to hear what it said.

There were times when the children of Israel did not want to hear God's Word (**2 Kings 17:13-14; 18:12; Jeremiah 13:9-11**). There were times when they said that they wanted to hear the Word of the Law, but after hearing it, they rejected it, because it didn't say what they wanted to hear (**Jeremiah 42:1 - 43:7**). But these people gathered here at Jerusalem had a desire for the Word. And as we will see a bit later in the lesson, it wasn't going to be a case of simply wanting to hear what God had to say out of some sort of passing curiosity.

- b) **Nehemiah 8:3** “Then he read from it.....from morning until midday....and the ears of all the people were attentive”.

Depending on how you define “*morning*”, they were assembled and listened to God's Word for something like 3 hours or more. (Some versions say from “*early morning*”⁴, making it more than 3 hours.) The time involved didn't seem to be an issue because of their attitude – they wanted to hear the Word of the Lord.

Note: When we are engaged in something that we really want to do, time doesn't seem to be a problem. If anything, the time always seems to be too short.

But notice how they were listening – “...the people **were attentive to the Book of the Law**”. The Easy-to-Read version Bible says that “...they **listened carefully and paid attention..**” (emphasis mine – SK)

These people weren't there just to kill time. They weren't there just so that they could “tick off” having read the scriptures for that day. Their mind wasn't elsewhere, thinking about other things. They were there to listen, and to listen carefully to what God had to say to them. There is no record that any “theatrics” were involved to keep their attention – Ezra was simply reading it out (**Nehemiah 8:3a**), straight from the Book. And they were paying attention to every word of it.

Point: When we love God on His terms (using His definition of love), then we will want to know His Word; we will want to know what God has to say to us (**1 Peter 2:2**); we will want to know what God requires of us (**John 14:15; 1 John 5:3**). In **Matthew 5:6** we read, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..*” Those who hunger for righteousness are blessed, and part of

³ Quotes are from the New King James Version Bible

⁴ Easy to Read version Bible

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that process involves having a hunger for God's Word so that we can know what righteousness is (**2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 4:16**).

- how many times, when God's Word is being presented to us from the pulpit, do we find our minds far away thinking about other things?

If we want to be the church that God wants us to be, then we need to have a hunger for the Word just like those gathered at Jerusalem.

2) They had respect for the Word of God

Nehemiah 8:5 “.....and when he opened it (i.e. the Book - SK), all the people stood up”

We see in this verse that when Ezra was about to read from the Book of the Law, all of the people stood up. No-one asked them to stand; they just did it spontaneously in anticipation of what they were about to hear.

I haven't found anything in the Old Testament that required the children of Israel to stand while the Law was being read to them. The nearest I can find is passages like **Numbers 11:16-17**, where God asked that the elders stand with Moses in the Tabernacle while He talked with Moses and shared His Spirit amongst them.

When I was a child, I can remember going to the movies, and after all of the films were finished, the national anthem would be played. Without a word being spoken, everyone in the cinema would stand up and remain standing, quietly, until the anthem was finished. This was done as a mark of respect for the nation's head of state. When I was in the Air Force, any time a senior officer walked into the room, all present were required to stand. This too was a mark of respect for the officer's status and authority.

Even these days, there are times when we too stand during significant and important occasions as a sign of respect.

And that seems to be what is happening here in **Nehemiah 8:5**. The Book of the Law was (and is) the Word of God. This was the Almighty God speaking to His people through Ezra and the written word. Moses had written the Book of the Law at the command of God (**Exodus 24:4; 34:27; Deuteronomy 31:9; John 7:19**). God's Word is not a collection of myths and fairy tales. God's Word is truth (**John 17:17b**). It comes from deep within the mind of God (**1 Corinthians 2:10-13**). People are blessed when they follow God's Word (**Psalms 1:1-3; 1 Peter 1:22a**).

And so the children of Israel not only had a hunger for the Word, they also respected it for what it is – the Word of the Almighty, the All-Powerful, Merciful God (**Genesis 17:1; Psalm 147:5; Ephesians 2:4**).

Point: I am not suggesting that we stand every time the scriptures are read to us. But we cannot claim to love God, and at the same time, not have a deep respect for His Word (**Psalms 119:11, 65-72; John 14:15; Acts 20:32**).

Jesus often demonstrated the respect that He had for God's Word.

- When faced with temptations from Satan, He rejected whatever short-term material gain Satan may have offered, and instead said, “*It is written,.....*” (**Matthew 4:1-10**)

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- The things that He taught were not His own doctrine, but what the Father told Him to speak (**John 7:16-17; 12:49-50**).
- In order for the scriptures to be fulfilled,
 - He would not let Peter distract Him from doing what He came to do (**Matthew 16:21-23**),
 - He allowed Judas to go ahead and betray Him (**John 13:18**),
 - and while dying an agonising death on the cross, in order “...*that the scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I thirst”*” (**John 19:28**).

For Jesus, the written Word was paramount. It had first place over everything else in His life (**John 8:29; 15:10b; 17:4**). His life was about fulfilling those things that were written.

But what about us ? What is our attitude towards the Word ?

- Do we see it as optional – just another religious book among many ?
- Or do we consider God’s Word as the “final say” on any topic relating to our faith and practice ?
- Do we honour His Word by simply accepting it as it is written ?
- Or do we try to find ways to make it say what we want it to say ?

God’s Word comes from God Himself (**2 Timothy 3:16**). God’s Word is Truth (**John 17:17b**). And God’s Word is to be respected (**Psalms 119:9; Hebrews 3:7-11**).

3) They needed to understand what they were hearing

Nehemiah 8:7-8 “.....*the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law.....and helped them to understand the reading.....*”

Not only did the people want (and need) to hear the Word of the Law, they also needed to understand it. Several people who are named, plus the Levites, assisted Ezra by explaining to the people what the Word meant.

Firstly, we see that they read “*distinctly from the Book*” (vs.8). This means that they read it exactly as it is written. In other words, they did not paraphrase the text. They did not say what they think it said. They did not say what they would have liked it to say. They said what it actually says.

Secondly, they “*gave the sense*⁵.....*helped them to understand*⁶ *the reading*” (vs.8). They explained what was being read so that the people understood what was being read. They made it easier for them to understand its meaning, and what it meant for their lives.

Notice how the people are still paying attention. In verse 7 we read that “*the people stood in their place*”. There was no wandering off. They remained in their place as the Word was read and explained to them. We read in verse 3 that “*all of the people were attentive to the Book of the Law*”. They were paying attention to what was being read. They were not thinking about what they were going to do this afternoon, or passing the time by playing cards, or whatever. They were listening and taking note of what was being said so that they understood what it was that God required of them.

⁵ Strong’s concordance, 7922, knowledge, sense understanding, wisdom, wise

⁶ Strong’s concordance, 995, consider, discern, consider, inform, instruct

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Point: We need to be constant readers of God's Word (**1 Timothy 4:13; Psalm 1:1-2**) But it is not enough just to read it – we need to understand what we are reading if it is going to have any effect on our lives. If we just run our eyes over the scriptures each day just so that we can say, “*Well, I've read it today*”, without understanding what we have read, or without thinking about what we have read, then we probably haven't achieved very much. While there are some things that may be hard to understand (**2 Peter 3:16**), the New Testament was written to the ordinary people who made up the various congregations (**Galatians 1:1-2; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; etc.**). Paul said that the purpose of his writings was so that the readers could understand what God had revealed to him about the mystery of Christ (**Ephesians 3:1-4**).

This doesn't mean that we don't have a need for teachers and preachers. While we can learn and understand His Word through private study, we can also gain insights into His Word through public teaching and by studying with one another. None of us know everything about everything. None of us will have all the answers to every aspect of scripture. The Ethiopian Eunuch (in **Acts 8:27-33**) was a worshipper of God, but he had trouble understanding a passage of scripture from **Isaiah 53**. The evangelist Philip was able to explain to him the meaning of what he was reading, and that explanation resulted in the Ethiopian understanding what he needed to do in order to be saved (**Acts 8:36**).

And so, for those of us who have the responsibility and privilege of presenting the Word of God to others, one of the things that we need to do is to try and give it meaning to our audience. We need to be able to explain to our audience;

- what the Word says,
- what the Word means, and,
- what effect the Word will have on our lives.

4) They were touched by the Word

Nehemiah 8:9b “...for all the people wept, when they heard the Word of the Lord.”

As the children of Israel stood there listening to the Word, they cried, they wept. It doesn't say specifically why they wept, but I suspect that as they listened to Ezra reading the Word to them,

- they would have been reminded as to how holy God is,
- they would have been reminded of what God had done for His people,
- they would have been reminded as to what God had required of them, both in service to Him, and to their fellow brethren,
- and they would have been aware that their lives fell a long way short of what they should be.

Given what we have seen earlier about their love and their attitude towards the Word, and their repentant attitude shown in chapter **9**, we can see that these were people who wanted to be right with God. These were people who wanted to be right with God on His terms, not their own terms. These were people who would say, as the Psalmist said in **Psalm 119:173-174**,

“Let your hand become my help,

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*For I have chosen your precepts.
I long for your salvation, O Lord,
And your Law is my delight'*

Point: When we read God's Word, we see our sins revealed (**Hebrews 4:12**). When we read God's Word, we see the love of God, and the lengths that He will go to in order to save us (**Romans 5:6-11**).

We're usually very sensitive about things that affect us deep down. Sometimes when we think about these things, or talk about them, we can get very emotional. When we look at our own sinful lives, and understand the love, the grace, the mercy and the blessings that God has shown towards us, our hearts should be touched by His Word.

After seeing the people weep, Nehemiah, Ezra, the priests and the Levites told the people, "...*This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep.....Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength*" (**Nehemiah 8:9-10**).

Point: God's Word will convict us of our sins and (hopefully) cause us to have a contrite heart (**Psalms 51:17**). But that is not the ultimate purpose. The ultimate purpose is for us to repent, leading to God's forgiveness. And when our sins are forgiven, then we can have joy (**Psalms 51:12; 1 Peter 1:8-9**).

5) They applied the Word to their lives

Nehemiah 8:14-18 "...*they kept the feast...in the prescribed manner...*"

In the introduction, I mentioned that at the time of this chapter, it was the 7th month, and almost time for the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths). The children of Israel would have been reminded of this Feast as Ezra read from the Law. But from **Nehemiah 8:17**, we see that this Feast had not been kept since the days of Joshua.

So the people kept the Feast, and they kept it in accordance with what was written (vs. 15) They went out and gathered the branches from the various trees, made the booths, and celebrated the Feast for seven days "...*as it is written...*" (e.g. **Leviticus 23:40**).

"...And they kept the Feast seven days, and on the eighth day, there was a great assembly, according to the prescribed manner" (**Nehemiah 8:18b**)

Their love for God and His Word was demonstrated through their obedience. They did what God wanted them to do, and they did it in the manner that God wanted them to do it. It was done in accordance with what was written. And notice the result, "...*And there was very great gladness*" (vs.17b). When God's people do what God wants, there is gladness.

Point: There is not much point in having a love for the Word, knowing what the Word says, and having an understanding of the Word, if we are not prepared to apply it to our lives in faithful obedience. We cannot on the one hand say to

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God, “*Lord, Lord*”, and at the same time make a choice not to do what He says
(**Luke 6:46**)

*“Blessed are the undefiled in the way,
Who walk in the Law of the Lord!
Blessed are those who keep His testimonies,
Who seek Him with the whole heart!”* (**Psalm 119:1-2**)

Conclusion:

There can be times when God’s people may need to be rejuvenated – either as individuals, or as a group. There can be times when our faith wanes, or maybe our love grows cold. Maybe we have been “*tossed and turned by every wind of doctrine*” (**Ephesians 4:14**), or maybe we have been caught up in sin. We see examples of congregations in the book of Revelation that needed to have a revival; they needed to be rejuvenated..

- the church at Ephesus had left its first love (**Revelation 2:4**)
- the church at Laodicea had become lukewarm (**Revelation 3:15-16**).

We may try various things to keep people interested. For individuals, we may encourage them by spending time with them. For congregations, we may introduce changes to try and make things more interesting. Now not all changes are bad. Any change that more closely aligns us with the Word of God has got to be a good thing. But if the changes are simply relying on variety, *etc.*, to keep people interested, then we would be missing the point. We would be treating the symptoms, and not the core problem.

Like the children of Israel in the book of Nehemiah, a revival of God’s people starts with a love for God and His Word. After a history of unfaithfulness and rebellion against God, the children of Israel went back to God’s Word. They read it as it was written, and they obeyed it as it was written. It became “*a lamp to their feet, and a light to their path*” (**Psalm 119:105**) When you look at the latter chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah, you can see that their lives were governed by God’s Word (**Nehemiah 10:28-29**) – and at times, that involved some tough decisions⁷.

When brethren are feeling “flat”, discouraged, or waning in their faith, we need to do what we can to provide encouragement, but primarily, we need to encourage them to do what Paul said to the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20:32**,

*“So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the Word
of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an
inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”*

The first step in rejuvenating God’s people is to get them back to the Word of God.

⁷ For example, putting away foreign wives - Ezra chapters 9-10 (refer also to Deut. 7:1-3)