

The Reading of the Word of God

Nehemiah 8

God's Word Announced: *Nehemiah 8:1-8*

People Gathered

The events recorded in this chapter continue to encourage believers to this day. With the walls complete the Jews were able to settle down in Jerusalem. All seemed fine but something was missing. Their city was ready to be inhabited but their hearts required attention. Through the years the Jews had not only neglected Jerusalem but also their spiritual life before God. No amount of physical blessings could remedy this problem within. With burdened hearts the people gathered before the water gate hoping Ezra would read the word of God unto them. In a display of unity, the people assembled as one, with both men and women present. It's rare for the multitude to desire God's Word. Even today, churches are filled with those seeking fellowship, entertainment, fun etc. instead of God's Word. One wonders how many churches would maintain their attendance if all they had to offer was the word. But to those seeking God, His word is sufficient (Psalm 18:30).

In this passage Ezra moved forward to lead the people. It was proper for them to request him since he was a priest and scribe (Ezra 7:6-12). Nehemiah was present but assumed a secondary role to Ezra's work. Unlike most leaders Nehemiah knew his limitations, the spiritual work belonged to Ezra not him. Once again Nehemiah displayed humility in serving the Lord (Philippians 4:12). Ezra had returned to Jerusalem prior to this event but evidently did not establish God's Law (Ezra 8). It appears he waited until the people were ready. Once aware of their desire he was willing to read God's Word publicly. On the first day of the seventh month Ezra stood before the people with God's Word, joining him were thirteen men that were probably priests. This day was special for several reasons. It was the day appointed for the Feast of Blowing Trumpets, which meant it was a Sabbath (Leviticus 23:24). It also marked the day in which the altar was first set up when they returned from captivity (Ezra 3:6). Apparently, the people's thoughts were on God when they met in the street before the Water Gate. It's not surprising they wanted to hear His Word. The more we think on God, the more we will seek after His ways (Psalm 40:16).

People Glorified God

When Ezra opened the book the people stood. It was an act of reverence for God's Word. Before reading Ezra prayed unto the LORD, honoring Him as the great God (Psalm 47:2, 48:1). The people then lifted up their hands, a gesture of prayer, and bowed their faces to the ground (1 Timothy 2:8). It's clear Ezra and the people had great respect for God, which is missing in many churches today where the

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Celebrations of the Seventh Month (*Tishri*)

Feast of Trumpets – the first of the month

Day of Atonement – the tenth of the month

Feast of Tabernacles – began on the fifteenth of the month and lasted for seven days

LORD is often slighted. He has been set aside for cheap entertainment or worldly methods and His name is thrown around in a blasphemous irreverent manner. Because of this, many continue to live in sin without regard for God and His Word. When the LORD is not respected, He will not be sought after. Why look to someone you have no respect for. Instead, the LORD should be given our greatest respect, praise, and worship (Psalm 96:4, 145:3).

Ezra read the word while the priests and Levites explained it. These men were not on the platform with Ezra; apparently they were with the people, perhaps spread throughout the crowd where they faithfully taught the meaning of God's Word (Isaiah 52:7). Likely, questions were answered and difficult teachings were explained. This caused the people to understand. In other words, the law of God became clear so it could be applied. Little good is done with reading alone, there must be understanding followed by application (James 1:22). The Word God is for people, so they might live correctly before Him. It is not to be locked up or hidden but proclaimed to all that desire to hear it.

God's Word Applied: *Nehemiah 8:9-18*

People Encouraged

After hearing the law read the people began to weep and mourn, probably due to the understanding of their guilt before God. The word of God impacted their hearts (Hebrews 4:12). It appears the mourning became great, for Nehemiah joined the spiritual leaders to address the issue. He had remained quiet while Ezra and the Levites worked but when the people became distraught he looked to help. Nehemiah, along with Ezra and the priests, encouraged the people to control their emotions. It was a holy day, a day of rejoicing, weeping was not part of the celebration (Numbers 10:10). There are occasions to mourn and times to rejoice. Our emotions must be held in check so our conduct will be correct. This is possible with God's help (Philippians 4:13).

*"I am afraid there are many Christians, and some ministers too, who would be afraid to search the Scriptures, lest they should learn too much from them."
Charles H. Spurgeon*

It had been a busy day. After six hours of hearing God's word, the people were encouraged to go their way, return home to eat the fat and drink the sweet, which refers to a feast.¹ They were also directed to give unto those without, the poor, widowed, and fatherless. True service to God is unselfish and considerate (James 1:27). The leaders reminded them to refrain from mourning because it was a holy day set aside to praise God. They were to focus on the Lord instead of their problems (Hebrews 12:1-3). Likewise, Sundays should be days of rejoicing not grieving, bickering or complaining (Philippians 4:4). Praise God, we serve a risen Saviour! The joy of the Lord was their strength. Joy was not in their achievements or abilities but in God's power. It was not a result of worldly treasures but God's grace and mercy. It is found only in God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:11).

¹ John Gill, "Gill's Commentary on the Bible: Nehemiah," (Bible Truth Forum: E-book, 2005) p. 57

People Excited

On the second day, the people gathered again so they could know more about God's Word. The blessings that came with understanding encouraged them to seek after His ways. The more time we spend in the Bible, the more we will desire to read it. After searching the scriptures they found a neglected teaching concerning the feast of the seventh month, the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:13; 31:10-11; Leviticus 23:34-42). This feast, which began on the fifteenth of the month and lasted seven days, was a reminder of the time spent in the wilderness. God's great care was evident during this time as the Jews were taken from Egypt to their land. According to the law, they were to build booths and reside in them for the duration of the feast. They were to be made out of branches gathered from the countryside.

The people acted immediately, sending out a proclamation for all to join in activities of the feast. The response was great, all were involved building booths then placing them all over, some on housetops and others on buildings. For the next seven days, they continued to read the law. The celebration did not take the place of God's Word. Everything our church does should include the word – always the word. We find the people excited over God's Word. Because of this they were willing to stand for hours to hear it read and follow its teachings, which called for them to spend a week in a booth made of branches. When God's Word is a priority we will not only seek it but also apply it to our lives (Psalm 56:10).

*"The Bible is not given to increase our knowledge but to change our lives."
D. L. Moody*

Questions for Consideration

Why did the people call for Ezra?

Where did the people assemble on this occasion?

How did the people show their reverence for the Word of God?

What was the effect upon the people of the hearing of the Law?

Why did Nehemiah and Ezra suppress their emotions and what was recommended?

How was the joy of the LORD their strength?

What feast was here reset?

What was the importance of the Feast of Tabernacles?

How long did this feast last?

How did God's Word change the people?

Points to Ponder

Do you desire God's Word?

Is it something you read, study, think on, and apply? Do you look forward to finding eternal truths from the Bible or is it neglected for other activities. The reason many churches do not focus on the word is because people have no desire for it. Do you?

What will you sacrifice for God's Word?

For six hours the Jews stood in the street so they could hear the reading of the Law. No wonder they applied God's Word to their lives, they wanted it. You must long for the word before you will live it.

What's wrong with the world's joy?

Joy in the world is limited and often hinders a relationship with God. Why – because joy found in the world will pull you away from God, either your affection or time. However joy in the LORD will strengthen your life for Him.

Why is it important to know the Bible?

When you search God's Word you will find His will for your life – His revealed will. Within God's Word you will discover what He expects and commands. When applied, this knowledge will lead to a life that is pleasing unto the LORD.

What is the danger of neglecting the Bible?

If you are ignorant of what God expects or demands you cannot please Him. When His word is neglected, His commands will be ignored. Soon, life will be all about you – your desires, wants, and imaginations – instead of for God's glory.