



**Adult Sunday School Lesson for May 25, 2008
Released on Wednesday, May 21, 2008**

“Renewing the Covenant”

Lesson Text: Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 13–14, and 17–18.

Read: Nehemiah 8.

Devotional Reading: Psalm 27:11–14; 19:7–14.

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 8.

Time: Around 445 B.C.

Place: Jerusalem

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT:

Nehemiah 8

1And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.

2And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

3And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

...

5And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

...

13And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law.

14And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:

...

17And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.

18Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Retell the event of Ezra's public reading of the law, including preparations made and some results.
2. Explain the importance of reading Scripture in public worship.
3. Plan a program or event that will challenge others to be more regular in Bible reading and study.

INTRODUCTION

When Billy Graham spoke on Founder's Day at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary on 4 April 1989, he said, "We've lost sight of the fact that some things are always right and some things are always wrong. We've lost our reference point. We don't have any moral philosophy to undergird our way of life in this country, and our way of life is in serious jeopardy and serious danger unless something happens. And that something must be a spiritual revival" (*Christianity Today*, vol. 33, no. 9).

There is repeatedly a need for a time of spiritual renewal. That is not a phenomenon of today only; it has been true for as long as mankind has occupied the earth.

Spiritual renewal will not occur apart from the preaching of God's Word. It has always been true that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). This is what prompted a gathering of the Jews shortly after the walls of Jerusalem were completed. It was time for spiritual renewal for everyone.

What a blessing and privilege it is for us to have such a gift of love as the wonderful Word of God! Let us be thankful and attentive to it as we consider how others viewed the Word in centuries past.

LESSON BACKGROUND

In last week's lesson, we studied Nehemiah's leading of the people in building the wall of Jerusalem. There were serious challenges to overcome. Between the end of that lesson in Nehemiah 6:15 and the opening of today's lesson, we read of more challenges that continued to confront Nehemiah. He had to deal with spies in his midst (Nehemiah 6:17-19). While dealing with those people, Nehemiah had to ensure that the completion of the wall did not mean a return to "business as usual."

Completing the wall was just a start. That wall also needed gates and watchful guards (Nehemiah 7:1-3). Nehemiah also noticed that Jerusalem was underpopulated and there was a problem with a lack of quality housing. "Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded" (Nehemiah 7:4). So the Lord led Nehemiah to rely on a genealogical list to move toward a solution (Nehemiah 7:5-73; compare Ezra 2). But before that solution was reached (Nehemiah 11:1), some important events intervened.

First Day: Attitude of Revival (Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5, 6) Assembly Gathers (vs. 1-3)

1. Where did the people of Judah gather, and where had they come from (Nehemiah 8:1)?

The wall of Jerusalem was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, which was the sixth month of the year. On the first day of the seventh month, Tishri, there was a gathering in Jerusalem. Nehemiah 7:73 says that the people had settled in their various cities, but an important meeting needed to be held so that the teaching that Ezra had been giving them prior to Nehemiah's arrival could continue. They came to Jerusalem so that they could hear, more about God and His will and ways.

The gathering took place in the open square in front of the Water Gate, which is thought to have been the gate on the east side of Jerusalem.

2. Who was the person the people looked to, what did they want him to do, and why would this have been so pleasing to him (v. 2)?

At that time Ezra was asked to bring the book of the law of Moses, implying that they wanted him to read and explain it to them. Though Ezra had been there since 458 B.C., this is the first time he is mentioned in this book.

This must have been a joyful time for Ezra, "for Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). He had been called upon to do what he loved the most, and no doubt he anticipated a wonderful response in the hearts of his listeners.

3. In what way did the people show respect for God's Word, and how long did this continue (v. 3)?

The people showed an obvious desire for God's Word. They listened with great eagerness for many hours. "From the morning until midday" is several hours, probably five or six.

We cannot help but pause and reflect on how indifferent many are who gather for worship today. Considering that many of our church services last only a couple of hours at most, this seems a long time. The people of Ezra's day were starving for God's Word, and so they feasted on it.

Perhaps it has been a while since we as a people have hungered so much that we wanted a feast like that, but God is more than willing to provide such a feast. A common time for such hunger is when a person first becomes a Christian, and the excitement translates into hunger for His Word (see Acts 17:11). The feast of God's Word produced quite a revival in Nehemiah's day; such a revival can happen again. However, we must come prepared and eager to hear.

In verse 3 of our lesson, we see that the reading of *the law* is to both *men* and *women*. The phrase *all that could hear with understanding* indicates that young people are present too. Everyone needs instruction and encouragement from God's Word! The importance of teaching children was recognized hundreds of years earlier, in the time of Moses (Exodus 12:26, 27).

4. How did the people respond when Ezra expressed his respect for the Lord and His Word (vs. 5,6)?

Ezra stood on a wooden platform accompanied by thirteen assistant teachers, who were probably Levites (vs. 4). This put him in an elevated position from which he could be more easily heard. There, in the sight of all the people, Ezra opened the book of the law of Moses and read

We should never take for granted the privilege of reading and hearing God's Word. "Reading the Word of God is a very important part of communicating God's Word to God's people. Public Scripture reading was a regular part of the worship services in Israel and in the early church. Today we are blessed above all people in history, for not only does nearly everyone know how to read, but there also are enough copies of the Bible available so that everyone may have a personal copy" (Jakes, ed., *The New Open Bible Study Edition*, Nelson).

Ezra's show of respect came as he "blessed the Lord, the great God" (Neh. 8:6). The word that has been translated "blessed" means "to kneel," implying blessing God by showing Him adoration. Whatever Ezra said and did at that moment caused a spontaneous response of "Amen, Amen" from the people as they lifted their hands, bowed their heads, and then worshiped God by bowing low with their faces to the ground. This was a deeply emotional time of sincere praise and worship for both people and priest.

**Second Day: Action of Revival (Nehemiah 8:13, 14, 17, 18)
Leaders Gather Themselves (v. 13)**

5. What did the leaders of Judah realize as they listened to Ezra on the second day of reading (Nehemiah 8:13, 14)?

The next day all the leaders returned for more instruction. Apparently the crowds of common people had gone home, but this was probably still a significantly large group. Once again they gathered with their teacher, Ezra, to learn more. They were responding positively to what they had heard the day before and wanted to be certain they would be the right kind of leaders for the people. It was right for them to receive further instruction, because they could then reach more people than Ezra could personally.

We should note that those gathered on the second day included more than just the religious leaders. The phrase "chief of the fathers of all the people" in Nehemiah 8:13 probably refers to the heads of the various clans or families. It was this group that discovered something important. They found out that God had commanded through Moses that His people were to dwell in booths during the feast to be held in the month Tishri (the seventh month).

The feast in question is the Feast of Tabernacles (also called Festival of Booths or Feast of Ingathering), and it is to be observed for a week beginning on the fifteenth day of this month (Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:33–36; Numbers 29:12–38; Deuteronomy 16:13–15).

On the first day of the observance, the Israelites are to construct *booths* from tree branches. The Israelites are to stay in the booths during the entire festival (Leviticus 23:39–43; Nehemiah 8:15). Dwelling in these booths is to be a reminder of the wilderness wanderings their ancestors had experienced after God had delivered them from Egypt. Jesus attends the Feast of Tabernacles in His day (John 7).

6. Do you think it would be a good idea for a person just to read the Bible on his or her own, skipping all the commentaries and instructions from others? Why, or why not?

Just to sit and read God's Word by oneself is very enlightening! Nevertheless, additional instruction on its meaning can be helpful, particularly when it comes to application. That's why the words you are reading right now are important. A person does not become a physician merely by reading medical textbooks; rather, a person becomes a physician by going to medical school where expert instruction is available. Expert Bible instruction promotes Christian maturity.

The elders of the people sought out the best teachers they could. They desired for everyone to have more understanding of God's Word. Right actions can be taken only when one has the proper understanding of God's Word. Zeal must be based on knowledge (Romans 10:1-3).

7. What did the people do in response to their leaders, and what resulted from their obedience (vs. 18,19)?

The leaders learn about the Feast of Tabernacles on the second day of the month (v. 13). Since the feast is to start on the fifteenth day, everyone has only 13 days to get the word out and prepare. So the actions of revival continue as the people are obedient to what they have heard from the law of God.

To make the *booths* and stay in them certainly can be considered to be a great inconvenience. But the people have a heart to obey! Their heart is seen in the fact that they celebrate this festival in a way that has not been seen *since the days of Jeshua* (Joshua) *son of Nun*, some 1,000 years before.

The attitude and actions of the people result in *great gladness*. People who seek to know and do the will of the Lord will experience the joy that comes from knowing and serving the great God.

The time of celebration ended with a special gathering on the last day. This too had been included in the instructions given through Moses (Lev. 23:36). It was the last day of the feast and meant to be climactic. It reminds us of the playing of a great symphony, in which there are various melodies and movements but which at a certain point rises to a great, climactic crescendo.

The joy of which we have read does not need to be relegated to ancient Israel. It can be ours as well, and it comes from obedience to God's Word. Spiritual renewal is sometimes the key to the return of joy in the heart. Rejoice in the Lord!

CONCLUSION

The Effective Word

There is nothing like God's Word, desired and applied, to bring about revival. The result of the reading of the Word in today's lesson was that the people entered into a formal covenant of renewed devotion to the law and service to God. It was signed by Nehemiah, the leaders, the princes, and the priests. They promised to keep the law of Moses, pay their tithes, support the temple, and keep the Sabbath. They bound themselves under a curse to keep this covenant (Nehemiah 9:38–10:39). The people were serious about following God.

As we have seen in this lesson, there are attitudes and actions that will lead to revival and spiritual growth. We too should continue to grow in our knowledge and observance of the Word of God because of the infinite value of the things written in it.

A careful and continuing search of the Bible will produce many great rewards. We will find truths and promises that will encourage and give strength. We will discover instructions to correct wrong thinking and conduct. We will find comfort and joy in knowing true fellowship with God.

If you are in need of restoring your covenant relationship with the Lord, you will find that He is willing and ready to receive you with open arms. Commit yourself to learn from, obey, and worship the Lord as a sign of your renewed relationship with God. You too will experience great gladness in returning to Him.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

A contrite heart and God's Word are the starting points for spiritual renewal.

PRAYER

Holy Father, thank You for Your Word. It is powerful and precious. Incline our hearts and wills to it that You would be glorified in our lives and that we would experience the most of Your grace and love. Through Christ we pray, amen.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Next week begins a quarter focusing on the images of Christ found in the book of Hebrews, in the Gospels, and, according to the book of James, in believers. Study Hebrews 1:1–14 for next week's lesson entitled, "Christ as God's Son."

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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