

The Reading of *the* Word



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Neh. 8:1–8, Deut. 31:9–13, Matt. 17:5, Acts 8:26–38, Neh. 8:9–12, Lev. 23:39–43.*

Memory Text: “So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading” (*Nehemiah 8:8, NKJV*).

The Jerusalem wall was finished. With the placement of the gates, the Israelites, under the leadership of Nehemiah, had thus completed the main task. When the wall was completed, the surrounding nations were in awe and recognized that this “was done by . . . God” (*Neh. 6:16, NKJV*). The enemies realized that the God of Israel was real because, despite the incredible opposition and hatred the Israelites experienced, they still had completed the work they had set out to do.

Following the completion of the wall, Nehemiah appointed a governor of Jerusalem (his brother Hanani) and a leader of the citadel (Hananiah). Both men were chosen based on integrity, trustworthiness, and reverence for God (*Neh. 7:2*), rather than on genealogy. The wall was completed during the month of Elul (sixth month, *Neh. 6:15*).

What was to be the next order of business? The following chapters of *Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8–10)* describe an important series of events in the month of Tishri, the seventh month (*Neh. 8:2*). In these texts we can see examples of how the children of Israel were determined to obey the Word of God and how they rejoiced in it.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 9.

The People Gather

Read Nehemiah 8:1, 2. What should this tell us about how important the Word of God was to the people?

When the Jews finally completed the building of the wall and moved into Jerusalem, they all gathered in Jerusalem's open square in the seventh month. The seventh month, the month of Tishri, was perhaps the most important month for the Israelites, as it was dedicated to the Feast of Trumpets (preparation for God's judgment, first day of the month), the Day of Atonement (judgment day, 10th day of the month), and the Feast of Tabernacles (remembering God's deliverance from Egypt and His provision through the journey in the wilderness, 15th day of the month). The gathering took place on the first day of the month, on which the Feast of Trumpets was celebrated. The leaders called together the men and women of the nation for this special assembly in order, through the reading of the Law, to provide an opportunity for them to learn about their God and history.

The people invited Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses before them and to read it. They even constructed a platform, a pulpit, for the occasion. It was not something that the leaders forced on the congregation. On the contrary, "they," the people, told Ezra to bring the Book. Most likely Ezra read to the people from the books of Moses, which included the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Read Deuteronomy 31:9–13. What did the Lord tell them there, and what lessons can we take from that for ourselves?

In Deuteronomy 31:9–13, Moses told the Israelites that during the Feast of Tabernacles they were to gather and read together the Law of God, and it mentions the various groups that should gather: men, women, children, and foreigners living within their gates.

A literal reading of Nehemiah 8:1 says that they gathered together "as one man." What does that tell us about the importance of unity among the body of believers?

Reading and Hearing the Law

Ezra “brought the Law” before the assembly to read. What did he read to them? Only the Ten Commandments over and over for half a day? The reference to the book of the Law is to be understood as the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, known as the Hebrew Torah. The term “law,” therefore, covers only a part of what was included in the reading; it would be better to translate it as “instructions.” They are God’s instructions enabling us to know the path on which we should walk in order not to miss the goal. When Ezra read, the people heard about their history as the people of God, beginning with Creation through the time of Joshua. Through stories, songs, poems, blessings, and laws, they were reminded of their struggles in following God and of God’s faithfulness to them. The Torah includes “law,” but it is more than that; it incorporates the history of the people of God and especially reveals God’s leading. Consequently, it gave the community its roots and identity.

Read Nehemiah 8:3; Deuteronomy 4:1; 6:3, 4; Joshua 1:9; Psalm 1:2; Proverbs 19:20; Ezekiel 37:4; and Matthew 17:5. What do these verses teach us about how we are to interact with the Word of God?

That the people desired to hear the Word of God most likely was the result of Ezra’s reading and teaching the Word since his arrival in Jerusalem some 13 years before. He was dedicated to God’s work and determined to make a difference. The Word of God became real to the people as they kept hearing it from Ezra. As a result, they made a conscious decision to hear and to listen, because they were interested in hearing from God. Thus, on this occasion, they approached the Torah with reverence and a desire to learn.

Saturating ourselves in the Word creates a deeper yearning for God in our lives.

How do you relate to the Word of God? That is, even though you claim to believe it, how is that claim made manifest in your life, in the sense of how you seek to obey what it teaches? How differently would you live if you didn’t obey the Bible?

Reading and Interpreting the Word

Read Nehemiah 8:4–8. How was the reading of the Law done?

There were two groups of 13 men who stood with Ezra during the reading. The first group of 13 (*Neh. 8:4*) helped to read the Word of God, and the second group of 13 (*Neh. 8:7*) helped with the understanding of the passages. We do not have any information about how this arrangement worked in the open square; however, the men who helped with the reading possibly held the Torah (Hebrew scrolls were heavy and needed to be unrolled by others), as well as read from it successively, alternating between the readers. Because they were reading from morning until midday, they had figured out a way to reach everyone in the square.

The phrases “they gave the sense” and “helped the people to understand the reading” (*Neh. 8:8, NKJV*) can refer either to interpretation or translation of the passages. Both are just as likely in this instance. The people had returned from Babylon, where they had lived for many years, and the primary language there was Aramaic. Therefore, hearing the Hebrew reading may not have been easy to understand for many, especially the younger generations. At the same time, readers of the Bible can benefit from explanation or commentary. Preaching and explanation make the text come alive and press hearers to apply the information personally.

Read Acts 8:26–38. What happened here that parallels what was happening in Jerusalem in the texts above? What lessons are here for us?

As Protestants, we understand that individual believers must know the Word of God for themselves and that we must not blindly accept anyone else’s word on biblical truth, regardless of their authority. At the same time, who hasn’t been blessed by having someone help explain the meaning of texts? We need, each one of us, to know what we believe for ourselves, but this doesn’t mean that, at times, we can’t be enlightened by the teachings of others.

The People's Response

When Ezra opens up the Word of God, the Hebrew Torah, the people stand up. Before Ezra reads, he blesses God. After he reads, the people respond with “Amen, Amen!” (*Neh. 8:5, 6, NKJV*) in unison as they lift their hands toward heaven. They then bow their heads down and worship with their faces to the ground.

Read Nehemiah 8:9–12. Why did the leaders tell the people not to “mourn nor weep”?

“So, in later years, when the law of God was read in Jerusalem to the captives returned from Babylon, and the people wept because of their transgressions, the gracious words were spoken: ‘Mourn not. . . . Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ Nehemiah 8:9, 10.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 281.

As the people were listening to the words of God, they were struck by their own sinfulness and began to weep. When God reveals Himself to us, and we begin to grasp that God is full of love, goodness, mercy, and faithfulness, our own inadequacies and failure to be what we should be come to the forefront. Seeing God's holiness through His Word causes us to see our terribleness in a new light. This realization caused the people of Israel to weep and mourn, but they were not to sorrow, “for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (*Neh. 8:10*). In other words, despite their failures, they could trust in the power of God.

This also was a special day, a holy day, the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah), on which short blasts of the trumpets signaled the importance of “heart” preparation for the judgment of the Lord (Day of Atonement, celebrated on the 10th day of the month of Tishri). The blowing of the trumpets signaled a call to stand before God and repent. Because the day was designed to remind the people to turn to God, the weeping and mourning is understandable. But the leaders reminded them that once they had repented, God had heard them, and therefore it was time to rejoice in God's forgiveness.

What should it tell us about just how bad sin is that it put Jesus on the cross as the only way to solve the problem of sin and to give us hope?

The Joy of the Lord

The “joy of the LORD is your strength” (*Neh. 8:10*) serves as a reminder that it is God’s will that we rejoice and enjoy life. Most of all, it is not just any kind of joy, but the joy that comes because we know God and the reality of His love. Delighting in God, in His goodness, and rejoicing because of everything God has provided for us is something that we should strive to be doing every day. Moreover, delighting in God gives us the strength to face the day and to handle what comes our way.

Read Nehemiah 8:13–18. What happened here, and what does it tell us about the people and their leaders at this time?

The next day, the leaders of the people come to Ezra in order to learn more from God’s book. This initiative demonstrated by the leaders showed their desire to lead the community toward God. They understood that leading the people the right way would not happen if they themselves did not seek God and seek knowledge from Him.

Read Leviticus 23:39–43. What were the Israelites commanded to do, and why?

Notice that in Nehemiah 8:15 the texts refer to the fact that what they were doing was according to what is “written.” We see here another example of how seriously they now wanted to obey the Word of God, ideally because after decades in captivity they had learned their lesson about disobedience. Also, in the texts in Leviticus they were to celebrate the feast and to “rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days” (*Lev. 23:40, NKJV*). In other words, as they remembered God’s acts of mercy and grace and salvation, the people were to rejoice in what the Lord had done for them.

Think about what we have been given in Jesus, who was symbolized in all of ancient Israel’s feasts. How can we learn to rejoice in the Lord even during difficult and painful trials? Why, especially during these times, is it crucial for us to do so?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Instructed in the Law of God,” pp. 661–668, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Now they must manifest faith in His promises. God had accepted their repentance; they were now to rejoice in the assurance of sins forgiven and their restoration to divine favor. . . .

“Every true turning to the Lord brings abiding joy into the life. When a sinner yields to the influence of the Holy Spirit, he sees his own guilt and defilement in contrast with the holiness of the great Searcher of hearts. He sees himself condemned as a transgressor. But he is not, because of this, to give way to despair; for his pardon has already been secured. He may rejoice in the sense of sins forgiven, in the love of a pardoning heavenly Father. It is God’s glory to encircle sinful, repentant human beings in the arms of His love, to bind up their wounds, to cleanse them from sin, and to clothe them with the garments of salvation.”
—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 668.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 On what conditions may you experience “the joy of the LORD” (*Neh. 8:10*) as your strength? That is, is there something that we have to do in order to experience the power of God and His forgiveness in our lives? If so, what?
- 2 How do we find the right balance in mourning over our sins and yet, at the same time, rejoicing in the Lord? Are not these contradictory to each other? How do the law and gospel together provide the answer? See *Rom. 3:19–24*.
- 3 Read Nehemiah 8:10, in which Nehemiah says to the people, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” Eat the fat, drink the sweet, provide for those for whom nothing is prepared—and do all this because the “day is holy to our LORD”? What does this teach us about ways in which we can rejoice in the Lord? What does the fact that it is “holy” mean in this context?

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Nehemiah 8:8; Joshua 1:8; John 5:39, 40*

Study Focus: *Nehemiah 8*

The lesson centers on the importance of spending time in the Word of God. The leaders of Israel and the people demonstrate an incredible love for God and His Word as they spend many hours listening to Scripture read aloud. The events in this chapter occur on the seventh month (Tishri) of the year, which is significant because of three sacred days and festivals celebrated on the first, tenth, and fifteenth days of the month (Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles). Ezra and Nehemiah along with all the leaders called the people, including children, together on the first day, and the Levites began to read and explain the Word of God. The people listened for hours to the stories of their heritage, and God's powerful presence and faithfulness toward them. The reading and explanation (and translation) provided by the Levites deeply touched the people. Hearing the messages from the books of Moses convicted them of their own sinfulness and God's holiness, and they began to weep.

Nehemiah and the Levites encouraged the people not to weep or be sorrowful but to rejoice in the Lord because of His great love for them. Because of the prolonged reading of the Pentateuch, the people discovered that on the fifteenth day of the month they were to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. Therefore, they assembled again to celebrate a forgotten and neglected festival with seven days of feasting. During this time, they lived in booths on the roofs and in the courtyards of their houses and throughout the city while they studied the Word of God. The eighth day culminated in a solemn assembly.

Part II: Commentary

Because Nehemiah 8–10 are written in the third-person point of view, instead of a first-person perspective, as applied throughout the rest of the book, it is possible that chapters 8–10 were put together as a theological centerpiece that was intended as an explanation of the Israelites'

condition and their dedication to God. The activity of these chapters likely occurred after Nehemiah's group arrived in Jerusalem. It is noteworthy that Ezra surfaces in chapter 8, as he is mentioned together with Nehemiah only in Nehemiah 8:9 and Nehemiah 12:26. It is clear that the theme of this literary unit of Nehemiah 8–10 is dedication to God through the reading of Scripture, confession, and renewal of the covenant. Ezra reappears in the narrative because, rather than building a physical structure, his role is to lead people to study the Word of God. Nehemiah 1–6 (as well as in Ezra 1–6) focus on building projects, but then the attention is directed to the building of God's people (*Nehemiah 7–13; also emphasized in Ezra 7–10*). Nehemiah 8 demonstrates that the reading of the Word has a crucial place in wholeheartedly living in God's presence.

Structure of Nehemiah 8

- A. Book of the Law read (*Neh. 8:1, 2*)
- B. People respond and worship the Lord (*Neh. 8:3–6*)
- C. Understanding the reading (*Neh. 8:7, 8*)
 - D. This day is holy: do not mourn nor weep (*Neh. 8:9*)
 - E. The joy of the Lord is your strength (*Neh. 8:10*)
 - D'. This day is holy: do not be grieved (*Neh. 8:11, 12*)
 - C'. Found in the reading that they should dwell in booths (*Neh. 8:13–15*)
- B'. People respond and make booths (*Neh. 8:16, 17*)
- A'. Book of the Law read (*Neh. 8:18*)

Reading of the Word of God

The reading of the Word of God is an important concept in Nehemiah 8. It is incredible that the people listened to the reading for hours, “from morning till midday” (*Neh. 8:3*), approximately five to seven hours, which demonstrates their openness to hearing from God. However, this time was not just about listening to the reading but about understanding. In fact, “understanding” appears to be the most important concept of the chapter.

Throughout the chapter, the word *bin*, “to understand,” is repeated six times (*see Neh. 8:2, 3, 7, 8, 9, and 12*). It is striking to see how often that word and concept occurs. The author intentionally repeats the idea of understanding again and again to draw our attention to it. Along with *bin*, the word *sakhal* is used twice and also means “to understand,” as well as “to be wise and prudent” and “to have understanding, wisdom, and discretion” (*Neh. 8:8, 13*). From the beginning, it is stated that all who could “hear with understanding” (*Neh. 8:2*) were assembled, meaning adults and children old enough to comprehend the Scriptures. The Word was not just to go in one ear and out the other. Instead, it was to have meaning and purpose in their lives,

leading to greater wisdom, and to be transformative. Acquiring knowledge is not about storing beautiful concepts and information in our brains. Rather, knowledge is to impact our whole being.

The People's Response

Amazingly, the words definitely impacted the assembly because they wept. What they heard from the Law influenced their understanding of God and in turn changed the way they viewed themselves and the world. Hearing God's Word helps us to see things from God's perspective and see ourselves as sinners. Sometimes people today, while reading the Old Testament, mistakenly think that individuals back then could not see a loving God. But we see from the passage here in Nehemiah that the opposite is true. Spending hours in the Word of God, reading about His mercy and mighty acts, did not push people away from God but rather convinced them of God's love and merciful interventions. They realized that they were unfaithful, but that God was faithful. The beauty and power of Scripture is that, through it, God woos and pleads for us to turn to Him, showing us who He really is—the God who loves us and who does the maximum to save and restore us to Himself.

Time in God's Word leads to personal and corporate revival. "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (*Heb. 4:12, 13, NKJV*). Reading the Word aloud to the people has the effect of penetrating their hearts and minds; they respond with deep emotion. They feel sadness at their awareness over their sinful condition; but, in the end, they respond with great joy over who God is.

Another important theme found in this chapter is the role of the leaders in this revival. The transformation began with the leaders who called the assembly together as a response to God's instruction in His Word. They most likely had been learning from Ezra and Nehemiah about God and had been impressed by the unwavering love and dedication of these two leaders. The leadership capitalized on the opportunity and facilitated the occasion. They followed God's instructions and then put in place a structure for reaching the people through the reading. They did not leave things to chance but organized readers and "explainers" and translators of the Scriptures in order to maximize understanding.

The leaders' desire to learn from Ezra also exhibits a teachable spirit

and attitude. What a tragedy it is when people believe they know everything and do not need to learn from anyone else. Unfortunately, this attitude also excludes the willingness to be taught by the Holy Spirit. Being open to learning from others and especially from God is a prerequisite for making a difference for God in the world.

Joy of the Lord

The pinnacle, or center, of the chiasmic structure of the chapter outlined on page 81 is Nehemiah 8:10, which also reiterates “this day is holy” and then proclaims, “Do not sorrow.” Why? “For the joy of the LORD is your strength [*ma’oz*]” (*Neh. 8:10, NKJV*). Three times the people are told not to be sad or grieved, but rather to “rejoice.” *Maoz* means “refuge, stronghold, and fortress.” It also is translated in Scripture as “protection,” but most often it is translated as “strength, stronghold, or refuge.” For instance, the psalmist writes about God as being *maoz*, our refuge and strength (*Ps. 31:4, Ps. 37:39, Ps. 43:2, Ps. 52:7*). The word for joy (*khedwah*) appears only twice in the Bible. The other instance is in 1 Chronicles 16:27 in the song of David praising God as the ark of the covenant is placed in the tabernacle: “splendor and majesty are before Him, strength and joy [*khedwah*] are in His place” (*NASB*).

The Feast of Trumpets began with the blowing of the shofar (ram’s horn), which signaled the beginning of preparation for the Day of Atonement; therefore it was a time (10 days) of introspection and repentance.

Yet, Ezra and the Levites tell the people that they are to stop mourning and weeping, because the day is holy. Ezra tells the people that the joy that comes from the Lord is their strength, stronghold, and refuge. If they want to be firmly established and strong, then they need to have the “joy of the LORD.” Notice also that holiness and joy go together. The joy came from understanding that they were forgiven by God. This joy of the Lord was to be demonstrated through eating and drinking with their families, enjoying food and fellowship with one another. Additionally, they were to share food with those who did not have anything ready for a feast. There was time for introspection during the 10 days leading up to the Day of Atonement. However, Ezra wants the people to understand that repentance is not the only thing necessary. Rejoicing in what God has done in providing salvation is equally important. They were not to forget the promise of salvation but to rejoice because of it.

Part III: Life Application

Ezra taught the people that strength for everyday life comes from rejoicing

in the Lord. This precept almost seems too simple. How could it be that the most important solution for our daily problems is rejoicing in the Lord?

When we focus on rejoicing in the Lord no matter what is happening in our lives, we trust Him to be big enough to handle our problems. Such trust in God uplifts us and gives us the courage to face the day. It keeps us from moping around and pitying ourselves because of our circumstances. Instead, it keeps us focused on what God can do, and already has done, for us through the Cross.

- 1. Think of biblical individuals who had difficult circumstances in their lives and yet saw God carry them through their troubles. What can we learn from each instance?**

- 2. How important is our attitude? Victor E. Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and an Austrian psychologist, wrote: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”—*Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), p. 104. Do you agree or disagree with his statement? Discuss. Why does attitude make such a difference in our lives?**
