

People of the Book
(Nehemiah 8:1-18)

09/15/19

Spiritual renewal does not happen apart from God's Word. Ezra was commissioned to redirect God's people back to the Lord by reading and explaining God's Word. The people allowed God's Word to penetrate their hearts. As they heard and understood His Word, they wept, celebrated, and obeyed.

Introduction:

I love the home that I purchased 35 years ago. It is in a nice quiet and peaceful neighborhood. It is close to grocery stores, gas stations, Walmart, department stores, Chinatown, and Highway 59 and Beltway 8. It seems to be an ideal location. Besides all these great outward features, there is something that is more important- That is the foundation of my home. After living there for almost 30 years, I noticed the doors were not closing properly. Cracks were forming on my walls. I had a foundation problem. If I wanted a strong house, I needed a strong foundation.

Today, we will be talking about the Israelites returning from captivity to reestablish their nation again. In order to have a strong nation, a strong spiritual foundation is needed. Let me provide you some context to our passage in Nehemiah 8: In Deuteronomy, Moses stated that if God's people obeyed Him, they would be blessed. If God's people disobeyed Him, they would be cursed. One of the ways that they would be cursed would be to go into captivity. Because of their continued disobedience, Israel went into captivity to the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar. When the Babylonians conquered a country, they took the best of the Israelites and brought them to Babylon to become slaves. Jeremiah prophesied that they would be in captivity for 70 years. After 70 years, that prophecy was fulfilled when the Persians conquered Babylon. These new conquerors had a different method of dealing with their subordinates. Instead of taking them back to their country to enslave them, they sent them back to their homeland and then taxed them.

The Jews were given the choice to go back to their homeland. A large group went back to Jerusalem where King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the walls and the temple some 70 years ago. Can you imagine what they saw when they arrived at Jerusalem? If you left your yard unkept for one month, what would that look like? How about 70 years? When the people went back to their homeland, it was in a total mess.

God raised up two people to rebuild the city and the people. Nehemiah was called by God to meet the physical needs by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra was called by God to meet the spiritual needs by rebuilding the people. Actually, Ezra, the priest and scribe, was the first of the two that arrived in Jerusalem. He started teaching the people, who did not know God nor His Word because they had been enslaved for 70 years. In order to establish a godly society, they needed to be taught from Scripture. Because the people responded well to God's teaching, Nehemiah was able to rally the people to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 8, we have come to the end of the construction of the wall.

Now, the focus is on bringing spiritual renewal to the people. In order to have a strong nation, the people needed a solid spiritual foundation. The only way for that to take place was to understand and obey God's Word. Let us turn to Nehemiah 8 and see how God used Ezra to

bring forth a spiritual renewal in the nation of Israel. We will see that it is rooted in a strong foundation in the Word of God. [The first step of having a solid spiritual foundation is to have an intellectual response to the Word by understanding it.]

A. Intellectual Response to the Word by Understanding (Neh. 8:1-8)

From Nehemiah 7, we see that Nehemiah summoned all the people to a great celebration and dedication service held in the town square on the seventh month. One of the first things that the people wanted to do was to tell Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law and read it to them. There was a great hunger for God's Word. Let us read v.1-2 "All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So 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."

This event took place on the seventh month, which is a very significant time for the Jews. There are three important events that take place in the seventh month of the Jewish Calendar.

1. The Feast of Trumpets was celebrated on the 1st day of the 7th month, which is recognized as the New Year of the Jewish calendar.
2. The Day of Atonement, which is celebrated on the 10th day. It is when the nation seeks forgiveness from God for unconfessed sins.
3. The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated on the 15th day. The people were to live in booths to remember how God has provided for them while they were in the wilderness.

The people valued and cherished the Word of God. They recognized it as not any words, but God's Word that has authority; it speaks truth; it provides guidelines on how they can have a relationship with God as well as with one another. The Law can be summarized by the 10 Commandments. The first four Commandments focus on man's relationship with God and the last 6 Commandments focus on man's relationship with man. When Jesus was asked to select the greatest commandments, He picked two verses that summarize the whole law, which is to love God and to love their neighbors. The Bible has authority for all of life. It is through God's Word that one will get to know who God is and what He desires for mankind to do. Therefore, the first step the Jewish exiles took in rebuilding their nation was having an intellectual response to the Word by understanding it.

The assembling included men and women and all who were able to understand. This involved everyone including children and youth, who were old enough to understand. God's Word is important for the whole family. They worship the Lord together as a family. I am so thrilled to see several families here in our sanctuary worshipping the Lord together and listening to God's Word being taught. There is a lot of benefit worshipping as a family: you can discuss with your child what the pastor preached and how they can apply it as a family.

Ezra read the Book of the Law, which was the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. He probably did not read all five books of Moses that morning, but certain portion of it. Note that he read from daybreak till noon. That might be a good six hours. They valued God's instruction for them.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was dating Ellie, she would write me every day. She would send me a letter every other day. I looked forward to reading her love letter to me. Are we eager to read God's Word daily? He has written a love letter to us in the Scripture.

Note that all the people listened attentively as recorded in verse 3. They were focusing and paying attention to every word that was read. They consumed what was spoken. Let's read v.3, "He 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."

ILLUSTRATION: Last month, I attended a long-term care workshop. I listened attentively because I recently turned 65 and it is very applicable to my life. In the same way, we should all listen attentively to God's Word because it is applicable to our lives.

APPLICATION: One practical way to listen attentively during Sunday worship or Sunday school is to take notes. We provide a sermon outline in your bulletin each week. When we have to write, it causes us to concentrate more. It would be a good idea to read it when you get home and put it in a binder.

In addition, they all stood up to honor God's Word when it was read as recorded in verse 5. Standing is a sign of reverence to God and His Word. God is worthy to be revered. That is why we stand when we worship the Lord and we stand when the Word of God is read. This is to show that we honor God and His Word. [Not only did the people hear the Word, but they were also instructed. We see this in v.7b-8, "They instructed the people in the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read."

There were 13 Levites that went among the people explaining to them what the Scripture was saying. It is not enough to hear the Word of God, but it is critical to understand the Word of God. Most of the Jewish people lived all their lives in Babylon and learned Babylonian. Ezra read the Scripture in Hebrew to these BBJ, the Babylonian-born Jews, who were not familiar with Hebrew. It is just like a number of ABC or the American-born Chinese do not understand Chinese because they have been westernized. The phrase, "make it clear," in verse 8 can mean "translate." Because of language differences, translation into other languages like Babylonian might be needed before there could be understanding. There were Levites that went before the people to explain the Law by giving it meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

ILLUSTRATION: Last week, Pastor Jason mentioned the importance of heart language. There are some 2200 languages that have not been translated into one's heart language. How will the lost come to know Christ unless they get the gospel presented to them in their heart language? God's Word is authoritative. It is even more powerful if it is in another person's heart language. We have an opportunity to assist the translation to the Patip people, who do not have the Bible in their own heart language. I am proud to announce from last week, we have only 7 verses left that are not claimed from the Book of Colossians and there are 20 verses from the Book of Jude. We will put up the first three chapters of Ephesians for us to claim today. I challenge each one of you to join hands together to sign up for at least one verse at \$35/verse. It is the goal of the Seed Company to start all 2200

languages that have not been translated to start the translation by 2025. They feel that with the help of God's people, it is possible to finish all the languages translated within our generation. [We said the first step of having a solid spiritual foundation is to have an Intellectual response to the Word by understanding. The second step is to have an Emotional response to the Word by weeping and celebrating.]

B. Emotional Response to the Word by Weeping and Celebrating (Neh. 8:5-6, 9-12)

Before Ezra began to read and teach God's Word, he praised God because He is a great God. Worship is giving worth to someone. Ezra is giving worth to God because He is a great God. Through the Word of God, we come to know who God is and what He has done. It is natural for us to give him praise.

ILLUSTRATION: There was a family where the siblings that have not talked with each other for 5 years. I prayed that God would intercede. This week, the Lord miraculously brought them back together. I see that it was the hand of God at work. He is a great God.

Ezra had an emotional experience praising God as he and the people lifted their hands. The raising of hands signified worship and dependence on God. The people also bowed down and worshiped the Lord. When we worship the Lord, we should express our emotion. One of the ways is to lift up our hands to praise God.

Note how the people responded as Ezra praised God. All the people said, "Amen, Amen," which meant "so be it." It is a strong affirmation of what Ezra claimed God to be a great God. May we shout it out. Let us shout it out by saying, "God, You are awesome."

As further reading took place, the people were convicted of their sins and they started weeping and mourning as recorded in verse 9, "Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred 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." The audience had remorse over their past disobedience. The Spirit of God convicted them of their sin and they started to weep. If we humble ourselves before the Lord in His Word, then God will use His Word to convict us. The leaders told these Jews to stop weeping and rejoice. Nehemiah in verse 10 reminded them that it was a sacred day dedicated to the Lord. They should celebrate with a hearty meal and send presents to those in need because the joy of the Lord is their strength. Don't be sad, but rejoice in the Lord because He is the source of our strength. In addition, God had provided a way for them to be forgiven. The Word of God brings conviction and leads to repentance, but it also brings us joy. Jesus has forgiven us. We can be saved by placing our faith in Him.

[A third step of having a solid spiritual foundation is to a volitional response to the Word by obeying. Let's read vv.13-14, "On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month."]

C. Volitional Response to the Word by Obeying (Neh. 8:13-18)

Here in the second day of July, you might think that they might be tired of such a long worship service the day before. But that is just the opposite. The heads of all the families went to Ezra wanting to know more from the Word. From their study of God's Word, they realized that God has commanded them to live in booths during the seventh month of the year. This is the Feast of the Tabernacle. They were to build booths or temporary shelters with branches from various trees and to live in it for a week to look back to remember how God had provided for them when they were homeless in the wilderness living in temporary shelters for 40 years. Each day, God provided food and water for approximately 2 million people. God is a great God that loves His people.

Note how the people responded to God's Word once they heard it. Let's read v.16, "So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim." They were quick to obey. What the Lord said, they will do.

APPLICATION: What has God spoken to you recently from the Word of God? God has spoken to me that I need to be more generous in my giving. He has blessed me abundantly and I should contribute much more into His kingdom because that is what will last for eternity. I discussed with Ellie about what our adjusted giving should be toward our church, toward the Pearland building and toward the Adapt the Verse.

God also spoke to me to build relationship with an international student through the English Buddy ministry. As God spoke to me, I responded by obeying God by requesting for an English Buddy. It is a great opportunity to build relationship with someone that does not know the Lord. I remember a few years back when I had my English Buddy, who was a researcher. I sowed spiritual seeds in him. A year later, he moved to California. I lost touch with him. Later, he wrote me to tell me that he became a Christian. Hallelujah!

APPLICATION: As you read God's Word, what is God telling you to do? Knowing God's Word and obeying God's Word is day and night. It is not until we practice what God teaches us will we experience transformation. If we do not obey, we will only get a big head. If we want to live a meaningful life, we need spiritual renewal, which can only take place if we embrace God's Word. May we respond intellectually by understanding it. May we respond emotionally by weeping and celebrating it. May we respond volitionally by obeying it.

In conclusion, because God's Word is so valuable in our heart language, I encourage you to consider investing in the Adopt a Verse campaign. Would you consider adopting one verse to be translated into the heart language of the Patip people?