

# Nehemiah: - People of The Book

REVIEW: For the last several weeks we have been enjoying the book of Nehemiah together. While Nehemiah was written thousands of years ago, it has so much that is relevant for the 21st century. We have seen Nehemiah's compassion which lead to action. That in itself is a challenge to us today. What has God laid on your heart to get involved with? What part of a broken world is God asking you to work toward fixing? We have see Nehemiah's prayerful planning - realizing that prayer and planning are not enemies. Nehemiah prayed, and then he planned. No doubt God guided his thoughts in how to accomplish what needed to be done. We have seen Nehemiah overcome challenges to the building process - challenges of ridicule, threats of violence, challenges of his own people taking advantage of one another, and challenges to Nehemiah himself. Last week we watched Nehemiah not only rebuild the walls, he began to reestablish how their society would operate.

TRAN: Now that they know who is from Jewish families and who may not be, and now that they have the priesthood reestablished for a functional worship system, they can truly get back to worshiping God the way God designed for them in the OT.

INTRO: Victor Hugo is an author who wrote in the 1800's. Famous for such works as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Les Miserables*. Hugo once said, "England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England." Historians agree that England in the time of Shakespeare was very much a country of one book, the Bible. The Bible did, of course, come with the pilgrims on their journey to America - even if revisionist historians want to down play the Bible's role in the establishment of America.

It is debatable whether the Bible is "making" any nation today. One thing we can say for certain is the Scriptures did make the nation of Israel. Warren Wiersbe put's it this way, "They are a 'people of the Book' as no other nation has been, and the church today would do well to follow ancient Israel's example." Any time God's people get away from loving God's Word, they lose the blessings of God.

Today we are going to see Nehemiah's role in bringing the nation back to the Word of God. Nehemiah did not just come to rebuild the walls, he came to rebuild society. Nehemiah knew that the Scriptures were the building blocks for the Jewish society.

Nehemiah 8:1-18

I. Understanding the Word of God - 8:1-8

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- A. The passage opens with a time signature (the seventh month), and all the people are assembling for a meeting
1. Why are they all gathering in the square?
    - a) Turn to Leviticus 23:24 - this assembly was written into the law
    - b) If we had been OT Jewish people, we would have known why they were assembling, but because we are not, we have to go back into the law to find this out
    - c) They are also being called to the square by the Water Gate instead of the Temple
      - (1) In the Temple, only the men would be participating
      - (2) Here in the square, it is for all people able to understand
      - (3) We also talked about why it is interesting this took place near the Water Gate, when in the NT God's Word is compared to water's cleansing effect
  2. They are being called together for a day of sabbath rest, and a day to commemorate
    - a) This is the Festival of Trumpets
      - (1) It was a time to mark the end of the agricultural year
      - (2) It also marked the beginning of a ten day period before the Day of Atonement
      - (3) It was ten days of repentance, leading up to the Day of Atonement
        - (a) The Day of Atonement was the day in which the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people
        - (b) It was a foreshadowing of the once for all sacrifice for the sins of all of God's people made by Christ Himself
    - b) Mind you that this is probably the first time this had been celebrated the way God designed for the Jews in many, many years
  3. Ezra is called on to conduct this Bible study
    - a) Turn to Ezra 7:10 - Ezra was a very devout man
    - b) His love for the law was great, as was his understanding
- B. I want you to notice a key word that is repeated often in this chapter - look at verses 2-3, 7-8, 12
1. "Understanding" is a key concept here
  2. The people that came for this assembly had to be capable of understanding - which probably means no children
  3. But as we go through this chapter you will see how important this idea of understanding is
- C. Ezra reads from daybreak until noon

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1. The next one of you that ever complains that the pastor is long winded - we are going to institute Nehemiah 8:3
  2. It's biblical for the preacher to be long winded!
  3. Look at the next part - "all the people listened attentively"
    - a) This is a preacher's dream statement!
    - b) Now we are having fun here, but the reality is it is not about what the preacher says
      - (1) Yes, they are listening to the preacher
      - (2) But it is what the preacher is preaching - The Book of the Law - the words of God - that is what they are attentive to
        - (a) That is what we all need to be attentive to
        - (b) Whether a preacher is preaching it, or we read it in our Bibles, or we hear God's truth from the mouth of a friend
        - (c) Regardless where God's truth comes at us from, we should be attentive
  4. By the way, we often read this and think, "These people stood there for 5-7 hours listening? No bathroom breaks? No breaks to stretch?"
    - a) Reality is that Ezra probably called for breaks
    - b) If for no other reason to give his voice a break
    - c) I don't want to over spiritualize this and make you feel like you are bad followers of God because you can't stand and listen to God's Word for 5-7 hours straight - we sometimes over glamorize reality
- D. Verse four starts a further explanation of what is taking place
1. Ezra is on a high wooden platform - presumably so everyone could see and hear him
  2. He is flanked by a number of people
    - a) There is debate as to who these people are - levites, city officials, etc.
    - b) Reality is they were important for some reason, and the reason is not given - it is not essential to the story for us to know
  3. When Ezra opened the book, everyone stood up
    - a) This is an old tradition, but think about what that says
    - b) "We know we are not hearing man's words, but the Word of God"
    - c) Think about how this applies to us - Do we respect the Word of God
      - (1) There are people very willing to defend the Word of God
      - (2) But do we treat it as the very words of God
        - (a) Can that be seen in how we live
        - (b) Can that be seen in how we respect God's Word
  4. What book did Ezra bring?
    - a) The text does not say other than "the book of the Law"

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- b) Ezra probably concentrated on the passages of what God requires and why (the covenant with Israel) to refresh or reteach it to everyone
- 5. It seems as if verse six jumps to the end of his reading by praising the Lord for His Word
  - a) The people responded by lifting their hands and saying “Amen. Amen.”
  - b) Amen means, so be it.
  - c) Then they bowed down in worship
- E. All of this is a little hard to place exactly in time because it reads as if it is bouncing around in the service
  - 1. It seems as if, starting in verse 7, the Levites began instructing the people in what was read by Ezra
    - a) This may have happened in smaller groups by the Levites listed
    - b) They read from the book of the law too
  - 2. The words for “making it clear” and “giving it meaning” are hotly debated
    - a) I believe the meaning really comes down to “translated” and “interpreted”
    - b) The Jews had been away from their native land for decades, and most likely picked up the language of their captors
      - (1) Like most captive people, language dies if it is not actively worked on
      - (2) Chances are that may have happened with the Jews
      - (3) So the idea of “making it clear” is probably translate
        - (a) There may have been similarities in the languages
        - (b) So for example, if I handed you the first English bible (translated by Wycliffe in the 1300’s) and asked you to read it, could you?
    - c) The idea of “giving it meaning” is probably interpret
      - (1) Helping them to understand what the book of the Law means
  - 3. Why did they “make it clear” and “give it meaning?”
    - a) “so that that people understood what was being read”
    - b) Back to the idea of understanding
      - (1) God’s Word is not magical in that if you read the words, lives are changed
      - (2) The words need to be understood
      - (3) Please don’t throw Romans 10 at me, “Faith comes by hearing! All they need is to hear God’s Word!”
        - (a) Does hearing not imply understanding?
        - (b) Does preaching not imply an explanation the hearer can grasp?

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(4) This is one reason I believe in up to date translations of the Bible

(5) This is one reason I believe in studying God's Word

(a) Not just by me for you

(b) But by you for yourself, and for others around you, like your family

c) Understanding is key - first we must understand God's Word

II. Then we can rejoice in God's Word - 8:9-12

A. Before we move on, I have to admit that verse 9 is both a pinnacle verse, and a verse fraught with problems

1. It is a pinnacle because both Ezra and Nehemiah are mentioned together in the same verse - meaning they are contemporaries of each other

2. The problem comes because we have two subjects and one singular verb

a) Who does the verb belong to?

b) Is this an error?

c) While scholars may fight over this for years, and have at it guys, having two subjects and a singular verb is not unheard of, though rare in Hebrew

d) The evidence suggests that this is the case

B. As the Jews were instructed in the law, their response was one of grief, we assume brought on by conviction

1. The reality is that the Word of God should bring conviction for sin

a) But not just a general "Oh I'm sorry for that"

b) It should be a conviction, a godly sorrow that leads to repentance

2. They were reading from the "book of the Law"

a) In the NT we find that the law is incapable of saving us

(1) It's in the OT too

(2) What the law is good for is pointing out sin

b) That is what is happening for the Jews here - they are coming face to face with their sin

3. The difference between them and us

a) We are not Jews under the law - meaning we no longer have to keep the law the way they did because Jesus fulfilled the law

b) We do not have to offer sacrifices for sin because Jesus was the final sacrifice for sin

c) So when we come face to face with our sin, yes, it should lead to godly sorrow and repentance (meaning a turning around from)

d) And then it should lead to thanksgiving and worship of our Savior who removes our sins, Jesus Christ

C. So God's Word brings conviction here, but it also brings joy

1. Warren Wiersbe said, "The same Word that wounds also heals"

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2. Multiple times we hear in the Psalms words like Psalm 19:8 “The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.”
- D. It took some convincing by the Levites and Nehemiah, but they encouraged the people to stop mourning and start celebrating
  1. The Feast of Trumpets was a celebration of God’s provision through another year
  2. Yes, introspection was called for, as was repentance on the Day of Atonement, but it was a celebration
  3. Put another way, “It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.”
- E. The secret to Christian joy is believing what God says in His Word
  1. His Word tells us that the payment for sin is made
  2. His Word tells us when we trust Christ, we are forgiven
  3. His Word tells us that we are adopted into His family
  4. His Word tells us that God’s love is so extravagant to call us “children of God. And that is what we are!”
  5. His Word tells us so many amazing things about ourselves, and yet we too often live from a place of defeat
  6. We need to believe what the Word tells us, and live that out
    - a) Both what God tells us about ourselves
    - b) And how we are to live in this world for Him
- F. It comes down to rejoicing in God’s Word
  1. I have a challenge for the bold
  2. Your mission, should you choose to accept it is the reading of Psalm 119
    - a) Not just reading though - I have some specifics
    - b) Take 6 verses a day - that is all - 6 verses
    - c) Each day, pick out what God’s Word is called
    - d) And pick out what the result is for those that live by it or don’t live by it (not every verse will have a result)
    - e) Keep a little notebook for your discoveries
    - f) Psalm 119 is an amazing Psalm that speaks so highly of God’s Word it makes you want to be in God’s Word more and more
    - g) Here is some extra credit for you overachieving types
      - (1) Read the book *Taking God at His Word* by Kevin DeYoung
      - (2) It is based around Psalm 119 and will complement your reading of the Psalm
    - h) I have included a bulletin insert with your mission on it so you will know what to do
- G. My hope and prayer is that this will help you to develop a love for reading God’s Word, not just a sense of duty

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- H. The way the Jews rejoiced was by having a party
  - 1. They enjoyed choice food and sweet drinks
  - 2. The other thing they did was send to those that had nothing prepared
    - a) They shared with those of God's people that were in need
    - b) This is an easy principle to pull from in the NT
      - (1) We are told numerous times to in the NT to be generous to our brothers and sisters in Christ
      - (2) This is why, when the church is made aware of a need for someone in the church, we bend over backwards trying to meet the need
        - (a) If someone's heat goes out
        - (b) If someone needs help paying a medical bill
        - (c) If someone needs a vehicle because their's is beyond repair and they need a vehicle to get to work - we will do our best to meet that need
        - (d) If someone does not have food in the church, we have no problem making phone calls, because we are to take care of one another
- I. In this section is one of the t-shirt, coffee cup verses - "The joy of the Lord is our strength."
  - 1. In context, the idea is because you know what God's Word says, it is your strength
  - 2. The same is true of us - we have God's Word in our hands
    - a) Something that was not true of the Jews
    - b) We should be some of the most joyous people on the face of the earth
    - c) It is our strength because we know how to live to please God
- III. We talked about understanding and rejoicing in God's Word, the final thing which we have hinted at is that we must obey God's Word - Nehemiah 8:13-18
  - A. On the second day of the month, Ezra has a Bible study group of the heads of families
    - 1. They found that in just a few days from then they were to live in temporary shelters
      - a) The reason is in Leviticus 23 again - God commanded the Jews to live in temporary shelters as a reminder of the wilderness experience many years ago
      - b) It almost sounds like they had forgotten all about the Feast of Tabernacles, as if they had not celebrated it in hundreds of years
        - (1) We know they did in Ezra's return
        - (2) Somehow they either forget this command, or it fell into disuse

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2. As soon as they found out what was required for the Feast, they immediately began to prepare
- B. This is quite the display of being a people of the Book
  1. When they knew that God's Law was there to instruct, to bring joy
  2. They they were willing to obey
- C. It shows a position of humility before God
  1. That they will be led by what the book of the Law said
  2. They will not question it or debate that it has been so long that maybe the book is out of date
  3. No, they will follow what it says
- D. Imagine if we had more Bible studies like that
  1. God's Word says it, we do it
  2. Admittedly, the harder part is the thing that separates us from them
    - a) They had a law to follow that simply said - do this, don't do that
    - b) We are freed from the law, but we are still to follow God's teachings
    - c) Some of those teachings are not as clear as "do this, don't do that"
  3. I do think that we can complicate things more than we should
    - a) Francis Chan Video: How Not To Make Disciples
    - b) I think we do that far too much
      - (1) Forgive as the Lord forgave you
      - (2) Love your neighbor - wait, better, love your enemy
      - (3) Take up your cross and follow me
        - (a) And we get hung up in what does it look like to follow Jesus
      - (4) If you do not hate your parents and even your own life you can't be my disciple
        - (a) We get hung up - to some extent with good reason
        - (b) But call it what it is - hyperbole - Jesus wants your affect for your family and for your life to look like hate compared to your affection for Him
- E. Let's look at the result of their obedience - v. 17-18
  1. From the days of Joshua until then, they had not celebrated like this
    - a) Not, "They never celebrated this feast"
    - b) They never celebrated with this kind of obedience, with this kind of joy
    - c) "Their joy was very great." - what a great commentary on their obedience
      - (1) They obeyed
      - (2) So their joy was very great
- F. Verse 18, they read from the book of the Law every day, and the celebrated every day

# **Nehemiah: - People of The Book**

1. God's laws are meant not to be a burden, but to give life
2. And the Jews are rediscovering the life in the Law
3. Are you ready to discover, either for the first time, or all over again, the life that there is in God's law?