

# The Book

## Nehemiah 8:1-10

### Introduction

Victor Hugo, the author of two very famous books (*Les Miserables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), reportedly once described England as a country of "two books:"

*England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England. (Victor Hugo)*

Historians who study that particular period of England's history tell us Hugo was correct. Culturally Shakespeare reigned, but as a country England's national life and character was centered around the Bible.

Later historians have gone on to describe early America as a nation of one book. When the Pilgrims arrived in America, they brought along their own reverence for the Word of God. American statesman Daniel Webster said the views about civil liberties that drove our Founding Fathers into the revolution of 1776 were fueled by the devotion of those original Pilgrims to the Word of God.

The people of Israel could also be described as a people of one book. When Moses led them out of Egypt after more than 400 years of captivity, he took them to Mt. Sinai. There in a miraculous meeting between God and man, God gave the people the laws which He intended them to follow so they could be shaped into His people. And it so it was. Their book was the Book of the Law.

When they lived in a way that was consistent with what the Book of the Law outlined for them, they were a people that experienced peace, prosperity and the blessing of God. But when they ceased to live lives that matched what was commanded in the Book of the Law, they lost God's blessing and experienced hardships and even exile from the Promised Land.

From time to time God would remind the people of that truth. For example, just days before they were to cross the Jordan River and bring to an end their 40 year sentence of wandering in the wilderness, we read:

*Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. (Joshua 1:7)*

King David wrote something similar in one of his psalms:

Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,

but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)

So here we are in Nehemiah chapter 8. The people had gone through one of those stretches where they did not live according to the Book of the Law, and they were experiencing one of three major times of life under foreign rule. The city of Jerusalem had been virtually destroyed by their conquerors.

The first seven chapters of this wonderful book of Nehemiah describe how the people worked together to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem in record time, despite opposition from their enemies. When we come to today's reading the walls were finished and the gates were hung. All of the material needs of the people had been met. Now it was time to focus the people's minds on their spiritual needs.

So Nehemiah called for a Bible reading session. He invited Ezra the scribe to be the teacher. And on the first day of the seventh month for more than five hours the Book of the Law was read aloud to the people.

That is a pivotal moment in the life people. Their leaders – Ezra and Nehemiah – made it clear that going forward their lives needed to be shaped by what the Book of the Law said. They were to finally be a people of the Book. Everything that would happen to the people from that point forward would be a by-product of their response to the Scriptures. Ezra and Nehemiah made it clear that the people of God could not expect God to move if they were not positively responding to His Word.

Let's see what the response of the people was on that day that Ezra read the Scriptures to them.

### **RESPONSE #1: THEY EAGERLY ANTICIPATED WHAT GOD HAD TO SAY**

Look at verses 5-6:

*Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. (Nehemiah 8:5-6)*

When Ezra lifted the scroll and unrolled it to the passage he would read, the people who were seated in the square honored the Word of God by standing up. We stand up whenever the Gospel is read because of this tradition. The people of Jerusalem stood up in great anticipation about what God was about to say to them. Try to picture that!

If you watch sporting events on TV, you might notice how the fans in stands slowly rise to their feet in anticipation of a completed pass or a soccer goal or three point buzzer beating shot. That's what I picture happening here.

Remember, these were people who may never have heard God's Word proclaimed before – or this may have been the first time in a long time. They were eager for it, because they knew these were not Ezra's words or Nehemiah's words. These were God's Words being spoken to them that day.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Christians in Thessalonica, complimented his readers for having a similar attitude. He wrote:

*And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God ... (1 Thessalonians 2:13)*

Sometimes we can forget that. Our times of Bible reading can become little more than a thing to check off our "to do" in the morning. I love how in the Old Testament books of prophecy God reminds the people He is speaking: "This is what God says" or "Thus saith the Lord" Do you think your devotions might take on a new dimension if you approached that time with eager anticipation.

## **RESPONSE #2: THEY TOOK TIME TO UNDERSTAND IT**

Look at verses 7-8:

*The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. (Nehemiah 8:7-8)*

Verse 7, which we did not read today, lists the names of 12 Levites who took the words that Ezra read and essentially conducted a small group Bible study with the people so they could understand what the words of Scripture meant.

The Hebrew words used in these verses make it clear that the role of the Levites was to explain the teaching to the people in a language they could understand. That was important for a couple of reasons:

- The Hebrew language would have undergone some changes since the days when Moses wrote the Pentateuch. The everyday conversational Hebrew of the people would be different in some ways from ancient Hebrew.
- Many of these people had been forced to intermarry with their captors and likely no longer knew the language at all.
- Sometimes even if the words make perfect sense we still need to move to a point of understanding. (*So is God saying ... the lamb I offer in sacrifice must be a first born? Why?*)

It is one thing to hear God's Word read. It is something entirely other to understand it. That's why

- New translations of the Bible continue to be published, not because the Bible changes, but because our language changes.
- We need such activities as Bible studies and Life-to-Life groups. We all need to be in places where we have the chance to ask questions and grow in our understanding.

Don't shortchange your encounter with God's Word by limiting your exposure to it to the Sunday morning sermon or your private devotional time!

### **RESPONSE #3: THEY TOOK IT TO HEART**

Look at verse 9:

*Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy 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. Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:9-10)*

When Ezra read and explained the Word of God, the assembly's first response was one of conviction and grief. They knew that had not been living according to God's commands and they understood that their captivity was a direct result of their sinful behavior.

The sequence is important: first conviction, then cleansing, and then celebration. Yes, the Word of God will bring a person to a point of conviction and repentance. But it will then lead that person to a point of joy. For the same Word that wounds also heals. That's the Lutheran dynamic of Law and Gospel.

Nehemiah convinced the people to stop mourning and start celebrating because in the Word they saw the way forward. The secret of Christian joy is to believe what God says in His Word and act upon it. Faith that isn't based on the Word is not faith at all; it is presumption or superstition. Joy that isn't the result of faith is not joy at all; it is only a "good feeling" that will soon disappear. Faith based on the Word will produce joy that will weather the storms of life.

### **APPLICATION**

Within this congregation we place a very high priority on your experience with God's Word. It is one of the key marks of a disciple of Jesus Christ. As a church, we are

committed to preaching and teaching it. We want you to be involved in studying it and, most importantly, living it.

We have a number of resources here to help with that, some of which you can pick up on the table between the coat room and the library. I encourage you to sign up for one of the Life-to-Life Bible reading groups that are forming as well.