



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 8: Nehemiah 8

We come to the chapter that gives us the most in depth look into the restoration of God’s people Nehemiah was tasked to oversee. All of the effort, conflict and construction has been building up to this point. Until now, there was no physical security or social structure in place to allow for scriptural restoration to happen. With much of the organization in place, God’s people are ready for their massive spiritual restoration to begin. In chapter 8 we come to a major shift in the letter. The first seven chapters primarily address Nehemiah’s plans for restoring the physical city of Jerusalem. From chapter 8 through the end of the book, Nehemiah focuses on the doctrinal and spiritual restoration of God’s people to God’s original expectations for them.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12.

Pay attention to the response of the people throughout this passage. Pay special attention to the repetition of “the people” followed by their reaction to God’s word. As you read vv. 1-12, underline every occurrence of “the people _____” (be sure to underline the verb that describes their reaction as well).

What different demographics make up the audience?

How do they receive the Law?

What is their emotional response to receiving the Law?

It is helpful when working through a section of text to act as a detective and ask questions to learn more about the text. The stage for this chapter is set by the gathering of all the people to hear the Law (v. 1). In verses 2-3, we can see that the assembly included both men and women. Everyone in Jerusalem had turned out, and everyone was paying attention to the reading of the Law. Can you imagine how important it must have been for everyone to attend this reading? In verses 1 and 3 it says they gathered at the “Water Gate.” If you remember from chapter 3, this gate was on the east side of the city across from the Mount of Olives. The city gate was an important place for the people where social, administrative and political business took place (TWOT, 945). The square in front of the gate was a natural gathering place for the people, and prophets often used these locations to deliver God’s message (TWOT, 946).

In chapter 8, we also see the first appearance of Ezra the scribe and priest (which is why it is so important to study Ezra and Nehemiah together). It’s hard to imagine that, as a major leader of God’s people, Ezra was present during the major events of the first seven chapters, but Nehemiah never mentioned him once. Scholars speculate as to why Ezra is not mentioned until now (Spence, 79-80). Some believe accidental circumstances



Finer Grounds

caused a temporary absence for the priest. Others allege that after the events found in the final chapter of the book of Ezra, the priest settled elsewhere in the land. Whatever the reason, it seems logical to conclude Ezra had been nowhere near Jerusalem for some time. If Ezra had stayed in Jerusalem the whole time, Nehemiah would not have found God's people in such a terrible state (the city in ruins, the severe oppression of the poor, the prevalence of mixed marriages, etc.) Regardless of what he had been doing until this time, he is the primary figure responsible for the proclamation of the Law in Jerusalem at this time.

In verse 3 we learn that Ezra read God's book of the Law for half the day and "all the people were attentive." Think about how focused Ezra had to be to deliver God's word, and how dedicated the people must have been. This isn't the first time God's people have singularly focused their minds on the word of God.

Read Exodus 24:3-8. Consider how much time, attention, resources and devotion events like these required from the people of God.

How often have we been distracted during a 30-minute lesson on Sunday morning? Do you find yourself thinking about what to cook for lunch or the bills that still need to be paid? In addition to listening to God's word for a long amount of time, the people were also standing (v. 5) for the entire duration. Sure, the display of reverence in that time and culture was different than ours, but how do we show reverence to God's word today? We certainly don't show reverence by writing the offering check during

prayer, checking our cell phone during the sermon, or getting up to go to the bathroom during singing. Our behavior is also being watched by non-Christians and children. Do they see reverence toward God in our behavior? Maybe what we need to ask ourselves is this: have we lowered our standard of reverence toward God? Look at the Jews' response as Ezra blesses God in verse 6. They transition from merely attentive to a passionate display of humility. Again, I understand that as Americans we tend to be more stoic in worship. Even regionally throughout the United States we display different behaviors to demonstrate our reverence and emotions. However, it is important for us to evaluate our own behaviors and ask if our personal behavior displays reverence or boredom.

In verses 7-8, they continue to read the Law out loud to the people. This brings us to my favorite part of this chapter; where the Levites translate and explain the meaning of God's word to the people.

Why would it be so important for the Levites to step up and be involved in this way?

What prior factors and circumstances made this such an important act of service on the Levites' part?

Think about it! The Jews haven't heard God's Law read to this extent in at least 142 years (probably closer to 165 years, since Josiah died in



Finer Grounds

609 B.C. and he was the last good king of Judah). Many of them are hearing it for the first time in their lives. God’s people haven’t been living faithfully according to His word for nearly two centuries, and so many different cultures have influenced their way of life. Try to think about the first time you heard some of God’s commands. You may have been upset, or even angry, at what God expected from you. However, with a good teacher there to explain difficult passages, and walk you through it, the reasons why God makes certain demands on you and I can become clear.

In verse 9, what is the reaction the people have to hearing the word of God?

Why might Nehemiah command the Jews to stop mourning and treat this as a day of celebration?

Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites instruct the people that this should be a time for celebration (rather than mourning) because they finally understand God’s will for them, and that is something to rejoice in. The people were ready and willing to change their ways and return to God’s original standard for them.

Read Luke 15:11-24, Acts 2:36-38, Acts 8:35-39, Acts 16:27-34. Can you find some modern-day parallels in the Christian faith to what the Jews went through in Nehemiah 8?

We see a very direct parallel today when we see someone genuinely converted to Christ. A person’s immediate response to hearing the word of God is often tremendous guilt and remorse for a life of sin. However, hearing the word of God is also a message of hope and “good news” because now we are given the opportunity to mend our broken relationship with God. That’s why baptism should be such a joyous occasion. When we learn how far we’ve strayed, God wants us to feel sorrow for our sins, but He doesn’t want us to mourn forever. Learning the will of God is a joyous day because it gives us the opportunity to return to Him.

Read Nehemiah 8:13-18.

Then read Leviticus 23:34-44. Compare the people’s response in Nehemiah to the commands in Leviticus.

Why did God want the people to live in booths?

There is an interesting pattern in this chapter of the book. You may have noticed by now that



Finer Grounds

we first see God’s word being read and explained, followed immediately by the people’s response to the public reading.

In verses 13-18, take a moment to mark the division where we transition from describing God’s word being taught to the response from the people.

As you read through this section and see the response of the people, their actions may seem bizarre. Without knowing the historical context, as well as the purpose for why the Jews were commanded to build booths (i.e. tents), it comes off as a strange command from God. However after reading some of the background in Leviticus, the answer is so obvious. Once the Jews understood the Law, everyone obeyed God’s word. It was so simple. They heard God’s word, His commands were explained further and the people obeyed.

Compare the people’s response to your own life. Do you always demonstrate this willingness to immediately accept God’s will?

What are some specific areas you can think of where, in the church, we sometimes resist and fight after hearing God’s word on a matter?

Things are really taking a positive turn for the people of God under the spiritual leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra. As long as they consistently demonstrate a willingness to submit to the rule of

God in their lives they will continue to enjoy God’s blessings. Chapter 8 is a tremendous encouragement for us to demonstrate that same willing spirit and passion for the Lord’s will to be accomplished in our lives.

Works cited

Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 1999 : n. pag. Print.

Spence-Jones, H. D. M., and G. Rawlinson. "The Book of Nehemiah Part II." *The Pulpit Commentary - Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*. Vol. 7. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980. 79-80. Print.