

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: SESSION 8



A NATION RESTORED
THE BIBLE AND COMMUNITY
NEHEMIAH 8:1-18
03/19/2017

MAIN POINT

We must carefully study God's Word so we can obey Him fully, worship Him fervently, and fellowship with one another joyfully.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

If you could learn how to master one field of study, what would it be and why?

How are the teachings of the Bible distinct from all other teachings we receive?

In your own words, what is the purpose of the Bible? Why is studying it important for the Christian?

All we do together as a church is founded on God's Word. This week, as we examine a Word-based understanding of biblical community in Nehemiah 8, we will see that God designed His Word to be the bedrock of our life together as a local church.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 8:1-8.

How did the Jews respond to the reading of the law? Why do you think the Jews were willing to listen to the reading of the law for several hours?

In Nehemiah 8, the Israelites "listened attentively" to the Book of the Law (Genesis–Deuteronomy) for about six hours, from morning to noon. One of the main reasons they were so attentive is because they did not have personal access to the Word of God. Just imagine it. What if our church decided to meet for six hours this Sunday? To us, that might seem like a long time to listen to a Scripture reading. But during the days of Nehemiah, the Jewish exiles couldn't get enough of it.

How does our view of Scripture affect our desire to read and listen to the Bible?

How might attentive listening to the reading of God's Word motivate Christians to be more dedicated to God's service?

Why is it important that believers today read the Word of God both alone and together?

The reading of God's Word reminds us of God's eternal character. It reminds us how we, like the returning exiles, are given the choice either to obey or disobey God. Through the reading of God's Word, we are reminded of our heritage—where we came from and who we are. We are reminded of God's faithfulness to our ancestors and His mighty acts of restoration. But most of all, through the reading of God's Word, we are reminded that God has a master plan, a mission to restore what His people lost—all through the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

READ NEHEMIAH 8:6 AGAIN.

How did the people demonstrate fervent worship in these verses? What do their different postures and responses in worship symbolize?

In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, bowing and kneeling were signs of reverence. It was a way to put someone or something above yourself. That's exactly what the returning Jewish exiles did in Nehemiah 8. They understood that posture mattered. So when the Scripture was read, they stood to their feet in attention. Standing for the reading of Scripture was not uncommon in those days (see 9:3). And after the exiles stood for six hours, they all bowed with their faces to the ground to worship God.

Romans 14:11 says, "For it is written: As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to Me, and every tongue will give praise to God." How is our posture toward God evident in the way we live?

In what ways can we demonstrate our reverence for God's Word?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 8:9-12.

What was the Israelites' response when they heard the words of the law Ezra read?

How did Nehemiah redirect the people's response and what did they do?

With the words "Do not mourn or weep," the leaders stressed the importance of joyous celebration. The people already had started to grieve as they heard the Law read. Although sorrow and repentance are proper responses to hearing God's Word, the leaders did not want the people to miss the joy that should also result.

Why did the leaders turn the people from sorrow to joy? How does the joy God gives differ from the world's concept of happiness?

HAVE A FINAL VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 8:13-16.

The people heard God's Word and obeyed it instantly. Why do you think "instant" is an essential part of true obedience?

What does instant obedience reveal about what we believe concerning the character and nature of God?

From the reading of the Law, the Jews learned that in the seventh month they should be observing the Feast of Tabernacles. Regulations for this fall feast are given in Leviticus 23:33-43 and Deuteronomy 16:13-15. When the Jews heard this Law read, they knew they should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month, so they immediately responded by building booths and obeying what they had learned from God's Word. Obedience to God is evidence of love for Him and relationship with Him.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What are some practical things you can do to rely more heavily on the Holy Spirit in your Bible study? What difference should that make in our church community?

What is one thing that distracts you from daily reading and obeying the Word of God? What habit or routine needs to change in order for you to make the study of the Word a priority?

What can our group do to be a community deeply rooted in the teaching and studying of Scripture?

PRAY

Close in prayer, thanking God for the validity of Scripture as the primary tool of spiritual growth. Thank God for our pastors, other leaders and volunteers who teach us God's Word each week so we are equipped to love God and evangelize the world. Ask God to help us respond to His Word in obedient faith and fervent worship.

COMMENTARY

NEHEMIAH 8:1-18

8:3. It is not stated why Ezra chose to have this assembly and reading of the Law at the Water Gate rather than at the temple. Some speculate that tension between Nehemiah and the priests, some of whom were allied with Tobiah the Ammonite (6:17-19), may have encouraged Ezra and Nehemiah to have the meeting away from the temple complex. It is possible that the size of the crowd demanded a different location. Exactly what made up the book of the law has been the subject of intense discussion. Probably Ezra read the legal sections of a Pentateuch that was virtually identical to what we have today. It does not say that he read it in its entirety, but that he read out of it.

8:4. The term "platform" normally means "tower," but it is used to designate a platform here and in 2 Chron. 6:13. Little is known about the men who stood on his right and his left. Usually in Ezra-Nehemiah priests and Levites are distinguished from the "laity," so these people probably were prominent lay leaders, such as representatives from the elders or heads of families.

8:5. The phrase "Ezra opened the book" is a little anachronistic since the book did not appear until the Christian era. Literally the phrase is, "Ezra unrolled the scroll." The apostle Paul specifically instructed that "Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13).

8:6. Worship for the people was not just a mental exercise, but it involved the whole worshiper, who stood, spoke, and knelt in humility before God.

8:7. Many of the 13 Levites who assisted Ezra were involved in the covenant renewal described in the following chapters. Eight of the 13 took part in the public confession (9:3-5), and nine are listed as signers of the covenant (10:9-13).

8:9. This verse is important because it links the ministries of Nehemiah and Ezra. Many critical scholars regard the mention of these great leaders together as an anachronistic attempt to link together the ministries of two men who, according to these scholars, were not contemporaries. Yet there are no insurmountable problems, either textually or historically, that preclude the historicity of this event. Admittedly it seems odd that Nehemiah makes no mention of Ezra, a man of such prominence, until this point in the narrative. This does not necessarily mean that Ezra was not there.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries who both prophesied to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, yet neither mentions the other. Here the author clearly attests to a joint ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, who participated together in the covenant renewal (chaps. 8–10) and took part together in the great procession and dedication of the walls of Jerusalem (12:27-43).

The command, “Do not mourn or weep,” seems baffling since the leaders would have been encouraged by the contrition and repentance of the people. However, this dedication of the wall occurred on the “first day of the seventh month” (v. 2) during the New Year celebration. The feast days were to be days of joy (Lev. 23:24; Deut. 12:12; 16:11), not mourning.

8:10. Rather than mourning, the people were commanded to go and “eat what is rich, drink what is sweet.” The term “rich” translates a Hebrew word found in the Old Testament only here in this verse but clearly related to the verb “to make fat, to be fat.” It refers to choice foods appropriate for a celebration. The “sweet” drink mentioned here may have been wine mixed with honey, a popular drink long before the time of Christ. The people were to stop grieving because their strength came from the joy of the Lord. True security was found in Yahweh alone.

8:13. It is clear from the following context (v. 15) that most of the people returned to their homes after Ezra’s reading of the law. It was harvest time, and there was much work to be done. However, many of the leaders remained in Jerusalem to study the words of the law and its implications.

8:14-15. The Festival of Booths is mentioned in four books of the law (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:39-43; Num. 29:12-38; Deut. 16:13-15). It was an eight-day agricultural festival that began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, during the grain and grape harvest (Deut. 16:13). The legislation in Leviticus 23:39-43 is unique in two respects: (1) only in this passage are the Israelites commanded to dwell in a booth for the seven days of the feast, and (2) only in this passage is their dwelling in booths given a theological connection, “so that your generations may know that I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Lev. 23:43).

Since the celebration of the Festival of Booths required preparation, the leaders studying the law with Ezra spread this news throughout their towns and in Jerusalem. No passage in the Old Testament expressly states the requirement to gather branches from olive and myrtle trees for the construction of booths. This seems to be an explanation and application of the command of Lev. 23:40 to gather from “majestic trees—palm fronds, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook.”

8:16. Those living in Jerusalem erected their booths “on... their rooftops,” because most homes had flat roofs. Those who came from outside Jerusalem used whatever space was available, such as the square by the Water Gate, where they had read the law two weeks before, or in the square by the Gate of Ephraim. The Gate of Ephraim is not mentioned in the detailed description of the wall in chapter 3. However, its description in 2 Kings 14:13 suggests it was on the north side of the wall. Thus, both locations provided easy access to the temple complex.

8:17. The celebration of the Festival of Booths was even more significant because the people had not celebrated like this from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day. What made the present celebration different was likely the spiritual and theological emphasis that pervaded it. While earlier celebrations may have focused on the harvest and thanksgiving aspects, this observance under Ezra returned to its theological underpinnings to recall God’s provision and care during their forefathers’ flight from Egypt, just as the people in Nehemiah’s time rejoiced in God’s care and provision for them in their flight from Babylon.

The author of Ezra-Nehemiah described well the experience of the people at the festival: there was tremendous joy. Critics have sometimes unfairly stigmatized Ezra-Nehemiah as banal, lifeless, or legalistic, but repeatedly this book emphasizes the joy that comes from living in covenant relationship with the God of Israel.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

Nehemiah 9:1-38