

**Let Us Arise and Build
Lessons from Nehemiah
Rebuilding God's People #1
(Reading God's Word)**

Intro: This year we have been studying from the book of Nehemiah; and we have seen the remarkable story of how God's people joined together in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. That great building project of the ancient world can offer us many lessons about the work of building for the Lord today.

We have seen the character of great leaders like Nehemiah and attitudes of great followers like the people of Israel; and how that together they can accomplish great things. We've seen that wherever God's people join together to do great things, Satan will be there to stop it. He will use fear, doubt, and discouragement to stop God's work. He will try to divide God's people against one another. He'll try to attack the leaders so that they will bow out. Yet we've seen that with the Lord's help, God's people can overcome all these things and be successful in doing His work.

I was tempted to stop there with the story; but there is something compelling about what happens next in the book of Nehemiah. And it is an important part of the story.

Were the Israelites going to rebuild a wall just to rebuild a wall? Or would that wall protect a people who served the Lord? Consider this! Upon completion of the wall Nehemiah instituted two important initiatives to protect Jerusalem's inhabitants.

The first one was a physical initiative. In chapter seven we see Nehemiah providing for the security of Jerusalem's inhabitants by appointing guards and providing for an adequate population in the city to protect it from attack.

But the second one was a spiritual initiative. What God's people needed to understand is that no wall would be high enough or strong enough to protect them from invaders as a manifestation of the judgment of the Lord. And there was only one wall to prevent that—to build a spiritual wall around the people.

Thus the book of Nehemiah describes another great building project—rebuilding a people who knew and served the Lord. As we look at Nehemiah's efforts we see four important aspects of that spiritual rebuilding.

Reading the Law

Reinstating divinely-commanded worship

Confessing sin

Committing to personal holiness

It was the 7th month of the year inaugurated by the sounding of trumpets, the month of two of the great Jewish holy days—the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Booths. Let’s hear Nehemiah’s description of the great assembly at the Water Gate:

“And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities. AND all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.” (Nehemiah 7:73b–8:12)

Here we can see the first step to spiritual renewal—reading God’s word.

Features of this great revival assembly

Teachers who could teach the Law

It is interesting that Nehemiah steps aside to give way to Ezra, the scribe and priest. From the time of God’s revelation at Mount Sinai, it was the duty of the priests to teach the Law to the people. Nehemiah honored God’s arrangement.

A platform was built for Ezra. This was not an attempt to exalt the man, but to assist the reading and honor the message. By having a podium above the people, everyone could see him holding the scroll of

the Law and could hear him as he read. All of this would add to the solemnity and importance of the occasion.

The teachers led the people in worshipping the Lord. Ezra declared God's name before the people so that they could know Him and worship Him.

Because many of the people did not know the Hebrew language, it was important to translate the Hebrew into the language of the people so that they could understand God's requirements. The teachers were able to span the cultural difference between the word of God and the people who had lived for many years in Babylon and who had lost some of their skills in understanding Hebrew and perhaps had no experience in the practice of the Law's requirements. (By the way this shows us that translation does not prevent one from knowing the truth if the word is faithfully translated. The truth is not lost when the word is spoken through translation.)

But equally important is this assembly was the:

People who respected the word of God

This whole section is dominated by "the people" (13 references). As we read we sense that the people show great respect for the word of God.

They were unified in purpose.

They gathered as one man and asked Ezra to bring the book of the Law to read.

This moment of renewal came from the people; it was not imposed upon them.

All who could understand were present to listen.

Notice that both men and women and all who could understand (among the children) were there.

There was not sense that the word of God was just for the "professionals." The common man could hear and understand God's word.

The people stood in reverence for the word.

It is remarkable that the people showed their respect for God's word by standing while it was read. And as it turns out, they would stand for several hours while the Law was read.

Note that they "remained in their place." They didn't allow impatience or disinterest to cause them to leave the assembly.

The people responded to the teaching in humble worship.

Note how the people were active in response to the teaching.

As the priests revealed the Lord's character, they expressed their agreement by saying "amen" and bowed low before the Lord in obeisance.

The people showed a sense of need by lifting up their hands.

They showed acceptance of the authority of Scripture by saying "amen." They showed humility by bowing low.

The people were deeply stirred by their neglect and disobedience.

As the word was read, the people realized how wrong they had been. They had been ignorant of God's word; they had lived in disobedience. The thought of that moved them to tears. They were upset at what they were hearing.

But the teacher's assured them that it was not a day to weep, but to rejoice in hope that a new day had begun in Israel.

"This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep."

"Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The people rejoiced and celebrated in feasts that they had been allowed to know the Law of God.

Lessons for us

The assembly of the church still remains a great opportunity for God's word to be read and explained.

One of the hallmarks of the NT church is the belief that the word of God should be accessible to everyone.

"Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." (1 Timothy 4:13, NASB)

Too much damage has been done in history through the effort to keep the people ignorant of the word of God, so that the professionals can control things.

We need to be people of the book.

Those who teacher must be prepared to effectively lead God's people in learning and worship.

"preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction." (2 Timothy 4:2)

Those who teach need to know what God's word says—how to explain its meaning and make application of it.

The purpose of Scripture is to reveal the Lord to us, so that we may accurately know Him and worship Him.

We too need to hear the word with the same respect and appreciation.

"And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." (1 Thessalonians 2:13, NASB)

I wonder sometimes if we really appreciate the opportunities God has given us to learn and worship. We take it for granted. We choose to do other things rather than meet with the saints. We justify our disinterest or misplaced priorities.

We need to hear with a sensitive heart.

So often people let what they hear "go in one ear and out the other."
He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Matthew 11:15)

Some religious groups would be careful to make sure there were no tears of repentance; instead they would work to make sure everyone had a “feel good” experience.

Certainly it was appropriate that God’s people be urged to celebrate this new beginning.

Conclusion: Reading God’s word is the first step in spiritual renewal. We can never be the people God wants us to be if we are not deeply connected with the words He has spoken through the OT prophets, through His Son, and through the apostles and prophets of the NT.