

Nehemiah 8 • The Return to the Word

Introduction

In this chapter we are presented not just with the characteristics of a true spiritual revival, but the biblical definition of “worship”. At this present time “worship” is most often associated with a time of music, but that is not how God’s Word defines it. In fact, even in churches which make an effort to retain an emphasis on the preaching of the Word, the fact is that they may still be falling short of the biblical ideal if they are not achieving the basic elements presented here. When God’s Word is properly approached by both the leaders presenting it and the membership receiving it, no one continues unchanged. A true return to God’s Word is always accompanied by true repentance and worship.

¹And 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. ²Then 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. ³He 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.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: WHEN does this event take place and what might be its significance?

A: “...on the first day of the seventh month”. (v.2) By this time (and to this day) this is considered the first day of the new year according to the Jewish **civil** calendar. (Not the calendar set forth in Scripture.) So there is a parallel to new beginnings in accordance with man’s traditions for treating each new year. This was also the same day when the first wave of Jews returned from exile who set up the altar and restored the basic schedule of sacrifices even before the foundation of the second Temple was laid. (Ezra 3:6)

Observation: *The first day of the seventh month is the Feast of Trumpets, the tenth day of that month is the Day of Atonement, and the fifteenth through twenty-second days of that month is the Feast of Tabernacles. (Lev. 23:23-44)*

Q: WHERE does this event take place and what might be its significance?

A: In front of the Water Gate which symbolizes the Word of God. But it might be important to note this does **NOT** take place in the Temple courts but at what would be the center of daily life in the streets of Jerusalem. This reflects the fact that God’s Word is not restricted to sanctuaries but intended for everyday life.

Q: The people requested that Ezra read to them the Law. Considering the time of year this is taking place, why is that both appropriate and perhaps ironic?

A: One of the requirements of the Law was that it be read aloud to the people every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles, the very same celebration which is noted in this chapter.

Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing.

— Deuteronomy 31:10–11

Q: This is not a trick question: How did Ezra respond to their request?

A: He brought out the Law and read it to them.

Application: *Ezra did not say the Law was too difficult to learn and can only be understood by specially educated or extraordinarily spiritually gifted individuals. He not only brought it out before a congregation of both men and women, but to every age as long as they “could listen with understanding”. It all begins with a return to the Word not just in church, but in daily life.*

⁴Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵Ezra 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.

⁶Then 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. ⁷Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. ⁸They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

[Read v.4-8]

Q: Who are the thirteen men who stood with and publicly supported Ezra?

A: It is not absolutely known for sure, but it is likely that they are elders from each of the tribes. (The land was divided among the twelve tribes but none was given to the Levites, so we often overlook the fact that in reality there are thirteen tribes.) It is unlikely they were priests since there are thirteen Levites identified in v.7 who assisted with Ezra's teaching of the Word.

Application: *The priority of church leadership is for the support of God's Word and its teachers.*

Q: Just as leadership showed their support and reverence for God's Word, how did the people likewise respond in kind?

A: By standing up as Ezra opened the book.

Application: *The priority of the church membership is for the support of God's Word and its teachers.*

Q: What did the proper teaching of God's Word result in?

A: Genuine worship.

1. Genuine worship begins with proper acknowledgment of God. ("Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God".)
2. Genuine worship is affirmed by the body. ("... 'Amen, Amen! While lifting up their hands...")
3. Genuine worship is accompanied by humility and repentance. ("...they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.")

Application: *Whereas the modern-day definition of "worship" is most often associated with singing and music, true biblical worship is an extension of the study of God's Word.*

Q: How do the Levites' actions in v.7-8 provide insight into how God's Word should be handled by both teachers and students?

1. Leaders must take the Word to the people. ("...the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place" – v.7)
2. Likewise, the people are to receive the Word in the natural course of the activities of the church. (v.7)
3. The original language of the text is emphasized. (v.8)
4. The goal is not **HOW** to read but to understand what it means and how to apply it. (v.8)

Q: Why would ethnic Jews need to have the Scriptures, originally written in Hebrew, to be translated for them?

A: By this time Hebrew was no longer their daily language. Coming out of the Captivity they now commonly spoke Aramaic or Chaldee. The need to understand God's Word in its original languages is far from a modern issue.

Application: *It is not simply about reading or revering God's Word, but understanding it practically so as to put it into practice. To properly understand what we must put into practice it is often necessary to visit the original languages in which God's Word was written.*

⁹Then 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.

¹⁰Then 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."

¹¹So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved."

¹²All 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.

[Read v.9-12]

Q: What is the result of the proper application of God's Word among God's people?

A: Repentance. "For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law". (v.9)

Application: How does this present a picture of the true biblical definition of "worship"? How might this reflect the way to measure whether or not God's Word is being handled by both leaders and members appropriately?

Q: Why would leadership at this time make the request, "Do not mourn or weep"?

A: This particular day was the Feast of Trumpets, a day that is normally accompanied by festive celebration. In just a few more days would come the Day of Atonement which is probably **THE** most suitable day for this kind of response.

Q: What is leadership doing in v.10-11?

A: Encouraging the people to celebrate the day in accordance with the intentions of the Feast of Trumpets.

Q: What should stand out in v.10 in the instructions given to the people?

A: "...and send portions to him who has nothing prepared".

and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name.

— Deuteronomy 16:11

Application: In order to fulfill the **WHOLE** Law, it is not just enough to maintain a right relationship with God but with others. God often proves one's love for Him by their love for others. When a true revival based on God's Word occurs, an inevitable visible result is a change in personal relationships.

Q: What might we learn from the Levites' admonition, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength"?

A: Spiritual strength does not come from fear and mourning but from faith and hope in the One True God.

Q: How does v.12 explain the root cause of all that is taking place?

A: "...because they understood the words which had been made known to them".

Application: One of the proofs of an authentic spiritual revival is the visible change in people who have truly returned to God's Word. True understanding gives rise to repentance which leads to expressing authentic love for others. If regular church services and even Bible conferences were actually accomplishing their biblical purpose, what would they actually result in?

¹³Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. ¹⁴They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. ¹⁵So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written." ¹⁶So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.

¹⁸He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

[Read v.13-18]

Q: How does this meeting differ from that of the previous day?

A: It is not attended by everyone but rather "*the heads of fathers' households of all the people*" and "*the priests and the Levites*". (v.13) In Old Testament Israel these were all the people who were held responsible for teaching God's Word to the people.

Q: What is their purpose?

A: "...*that they might gain insight into the words of the Law*". (v.13) The chief emphasis is understanding how to put God's Word into practice.

Q: Why is it probably significant that it specifically states in v.14 they discovered "how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast"?

A: What this is most likely referring to is that even though there had been celebrations of this holiday such as when the first wave of Jews returned to the land (Ezra 3:4), such previous celebrations were most likely only **TOKEN** celebrations. In other words, over the years (or centuries) they had not been strictly following the literal instructions in the Law and had instead substituted token rituals which only vaguely alluded to what was originally mandated in the Law. We know that there have been celebrations of the Feast of Booths recorded at other times in their history (1 Ki. 8:2, 65; 2 Chr. 7:9) and it is unlikely leaders such as Samuel or David would have tolerated a total disregard for God's Law in this matter. What is being expressed here is a genuine return to the *literal* Law and its *original* intent.

Application: True revivals do not "go back" to the traditions of men but to the original intent of Scripture. This is what is often wrong when people try to "get back" to the Great Awakening or the Reformation. In reality what is necessary is to get all the way back to the original teachings of Christ and the Apostles.

Q: What is important about how this group followed up on their understanding of God's Word?

A: This group, being composed of all those who were responsible for teaching God's Word, followed through by enlisting **EVERYONE** to put it into practice.

Q: We learned that the Water Gate represents God's Word. What does the Gate of Ephraim represent?

A: "Ephraim" means "fruitful" or "doubly fruitful". The picture presented here is the result of putting God's Word into practice (the Water Gate) which produces a harvest of right spiritual results (the Gate of Ephraim).

Q: What was the chief activity of their celebration?

A: God's Word. "*He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day*". (v.18)

Application: A true commitment to God's Word leads to an ever deepening commitment to God's Word. What began with God's Word was sustained by continuing to not just understand Scripture but to put it into practice literally and in accordance with its original intent.



Overall Application

- *What have you learned that teaches about how a biblical church should operate?*
- *What have you learned that identifies the existence of a true, biblical revival?*
- *What have you learned about your personal responsibility for the Word and your responsibility for encouraging its use by others?*

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