

09.11.2019 THE READING OF THE WORD

So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. Nehemiah 8:8

The book of Nehemiah is divided into 2 parts:

1. The Reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem.
2. The Spiritual Restoration of the Jews in Jerusalem.

Thus far our studies have focused on the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem. We have seen that under the leadership of Nehemiah, the wall is finished in 52 days and the enemies of Israel are disheartened for they recognise the hand of God (Nehemiah 6:15, 16).

God's true servants work with a determination that will not fail because the throne of grace is their constant dependence. God has provided divine assistance for all the emergencies to which our human resources are unequal. He gives the Holy Spirit to help in every strait, to strengthen our hope and assurance, to illuminate our minds and purify our hearts. He provides opportunities and opens channels of working. If His people are watching the indications of His providence, and are ready to co-operate with Him, they will see mighty results. *Prophets and Kings p. 660*

Ezra and Nehemiah recognise that physical reconstruction must be followed by spiritual reformation and revival. They begin the work of spiritual restoration by reading the Law (the first 5 books of the Old Testament, known as the Pentateuch) to the people. This is followed by confession and renewal of the covenant (Nehemiah 9 and 10).

(Note that books and scrolls were not available to individuals until after the invention of the printing press in the 16th century. Until then, people heard the word of God as it was read to them).

Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Nehemiah 8:1, 2

1. The people were united 'as one man' in wanting to hear the Book of the Law of Moses. It may be that working together for a common goal and seeing how God had helped them had unified them.

Whether the people had heard it before, or, as seems implied, it was strange to them, their desire to hear it may stand as a pattern for us of that earnest wish to know God's will which is never cherished in vain. He who does not intend to obey does not wish to know the law. If we have no longing to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure that we prefer our own to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire to understand the Book which contains so much of it. Any true religion in the heart will make us eager to perceive, and willing to be guided by, the will of God, revealed mainly in Scripture, in the Person, works, and words of Jesus, and also in waiting hearts by the Spirit. *McLaren's Exposition: Nehemiah 8*

2. Ezra the priest led out in the reading of the Word.
3. The first day of the seventh month is significant. It was dedicated to the Feast of Trumpets (preparation for God's judgment, 1st day of the month), the Day of Atonement (Judgment day, 10th day of the month), and the Feast of Tabernacles (remembering God's deliverance from Egypt and His provision through the journey in the wilderness, 15th day of the month). And God had commanded Israel to read and listen to the Law every seven years.

And Moses commanded them, saying: "At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place

which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess.” Deuteronomy 31:10-13

Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.(8:3)

The Word was read to ‘all who could understand’. But it is not enough to understand what is being read or heard. We must be ‘attentive to the Book of the Law’.

So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 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. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. (8:4-7)

Ezra begins with a doxology – he praises God... ‘Whoever offers praise glorifies Me’ (Psalm 50:23). The people affirm his praise... ‘Amen, Amen!’

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. (8:7, 8)

These helpers of Ezra did 2 things:

1. They read distinctly from the book. This word in the original means ‘to make clear’. These men read with clearness and precision which meant that they had carefully studied the text.
2. They gave sense and helped them to understand the meaning.
Gave the sense... Ezra was reading in Hebrew but the Jews who had come from Babylon were familiar with Aramaic and Chaldee, which were the languages of Babylon. These men gave the meaning of the Hebrew words in the language the people were familiar with.
Helped them to understand the meaning... They helped the people to understand the meaning (both literal and spiritual) of the passages they were hearing.

All the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. (8:9)

The reading of the books of Moses focused the minds of the people of God’s goodness – He was their Creator and He had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and taken them to Canaan... ‘*the goodness of God leads to repentance*’ Romans 2:4

The reading of the books also revealed to them their unfaithfulness to the God of the Covenant. They saw that their captivity was a result of their unfaithfulness. They were also convicted of personal sin by the reading of the Law; hence their remorse, repentance and weeping.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16, 17

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, 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 nor weep.” Then he said to them, “Go

your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” Nehemiah 8:9, 10

The joy of repentance flows directly out of its grief; we must fully acknowledge the weight of our sin; we must own that our sin sent Christ to the cross; we must face squarely, without excuse or evasion, the depths of our guilt before a holy God.

Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice...restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit... Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, the God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise. Psalm 51: 8, 12, 14, 15

True repentance is always followed by joy; the joy of knowing that God accepts us just as we are and gives us His salvation... *'He that comes to me I will in no wise cast out'. John 6:37.*

“Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared...”

Those who truly understand the Word and rejoice in God's salvation are always willing to share their blessings with others.

So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them. (8:11, 12)

Every Jewish feast pointed to Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, so they were called holy days. But every such day was also to be a joyful day for it symbolised the great salvation Christ would provide for the world.

When God's people truly understand His goodness and grace, their lives will be a continual expression of joy and rejoicing.

Thou wilt show me the path of life: in Thy presence is fullness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. Psalm 16:11

But let all those that put their trust in Thee rejoice: let them ever shout for joy, because Thou defendest them: let them also that love Thy name be joyful in Thee. Psalm 5:11

These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. John 15:11

Conclusion:

In the midst of our work in preparing for our King's return, it is essential that we read the Word and understand it so that we may be wise unto salvation (2 Timothy 3:15), and that our lives should be a joyful witness so that the watching world will also want to taste and see that the Lord is good.
