

## **Nehemiah: Reading the Bible for a Very Long Time!**

**Nehemiah 8:1-8**

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

*The Lord's Day Evening  
November 30, 2008*

Please be seated. Now turn with me if you would once again to the book of Nehemiah, and we come tonight to chapter 8. In the reading tonight you will observe in a moment that it describes an occasion in which the Scriptures are read, but they stood to have the Scriptures read to them. And I want to say a few things before I'm going to ask you to stand.

I'm not going to ask you to stand for the reading of Scripture tonight because we find here a prescription to do so. When you read historical narrative, we must always distinguish between a description and a prescription. There's no doubt that they stood for the reading of Scripture here, but they also did a number of other things that we also don't do on a regular basis. For example, they raised holy hands. So if we're going to say that every time we read the Scriptures we should stand for the reading of Scriptures, then we should also say that we should raise holy hands in worship. Actually there is no such prescription in the Bible, and as I was discovering this morning in Sunday School, in Jeremiah 36, when Jeremiah asks his scribe, Baruch, to go to the temple to read his prophecies, the word of God, the text specifically tells us that he sat down to do so.

As Presbyterians we have a very dear principle. It's one that we treasure and value. It's in our *Confession of Faith*, and it says "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men." That is to say that we only do things in worship where there is divine prescription to do so.

So why am I going to ask you then tonight to stand for the reading of Scripture? Partly because I thought it would be rather odd if we were reading a passage where they were standing and we were sitting, and partly because I do think from time to time as Presbyterians we engage in worship somewhat lazily, and the "Presbyterian slouch" needs to be addressed and I'm certainly guilty of that. So, let's stand. We'll stand for prayer and remain standing for the reading of Scripture. Let's pray together.

*Lord, this is Your word. Every jot and tittle from Genesis to Revelation is Your inspired, infallible, inerrant word, and tonight as we read it we want again, as we always ask for, the help of Your Spirit; that You would illuminate these words in our hearts and in our minds; that we might have an understanding of what it is that we read. And help us, O Lord, not just to be hearers, but also to be doers. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Now this is God's word:

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that 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. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Amen. This is God's holy and inerrant word. Please be seated.

Now by any standards of measurement this is a glorious passage of Scripture. This is the kind of passage of Scripture that should make our hearts warm, and glow with longing that what takes place here would in God's mercy and providence take place again.

Nothing like this had ever been seen for two hundred years. Not since the days of Josiah, when the scribe Shaphan read from the scroll that they had discovered — perhaps the book of Deuteronomy. Not since then, two hundred years in Nehemiah's past, had Israel ever known a day like this. This is a day of revival. This is a day of reformation. This is a day when God steps in. You cannot explain what takes place here by the standards and measurements of men. This has

nothing to do with Nehemiah; it has nothing to do with Ezra. It has nothing to do with the Levites. It has everything to do with God. God has come down. God has come down in blessing. God has poured out His Spirit upon His people.

It's been ninety years since Zerubbabel first led the captives from Babylon back to Jerusalem. It's been seventy years since the completion of the second temple. It's been thirteen years since the return of Ezra and his ministry. There have been some bright spots in that period — the completion of the temple was one of them — but nothing like this. Where's Ezra been for the past thirteen years? For that matter, where has he been for the last seven chapters of the book of Nehemiah? There's been no mention of him. Nehemiah has been back in the city...well, he left Babylon six months ago. The date is somewhere in the middle of September of the year

445 B.C. Nehemiah has been back for four, perhaps five, months. The temple has long since been completed. Now the wall — this civil engineering project that Nehemiah has been engaged in — is now complete.

Nehemiah is a very different character to Ezra. Nehemiah is choleric. He's more of a doer. He finds it easier to do than to be, we might say today. He's a civil servant. He's a government official. He's a governor. His concern has largely been this piece of civil engineering. Ezra is a completely different character. Ezra is a scribe. Ezra is a priest. Ezra is a Bible teacher and preacher and proclaimer of the word of God. And it seems to me deeply significant what's about to occur, because there's going to be a passing on of the torch now. We won't hear any more of Nehemiah. Oh, there are four mentions of his name in the rest of these chapters, but they're in the third person and every single one of them merely refers to the fact that he was governor at the time. But his involvement, and his personal involvement...and even the chapters that close don't come from his personal records. As we've seen, the earlier chapters seem to have come from his own personal memoirs. Nehemiah sidles out of the picture.

Actually what's happening is God raises up one and pushes back another. He brings one under the limelight for a season and pushes another back. He does that with Haggai, the prophet. The entire ministry of Haggai takes place in the space of four months. He seems to come from nowhere and then he seems to disappear again.

So as we look at this passage tonight I want to do so under three headings, all of them as it happens beginning with the letter "E". The first is *Ezra*.

## **I. Ezra.**

For the first time he's appeared in the book of Nehemiah. We want to ask all sorts of questions: what has he been doing for the past thirteen years? He came

back...his ministry we examined in the book of Ezra, but all of that was thirteen years ago. And Nehemiah has been back in the city for four, maybe five, months, but there's been no mention of Ezra.

You notice in verse 1, "They told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel." And the people obviously knew who Ezra was. He was engaging in a ministry. He probably was engaging in Bible ministry. He probably had already gained a level of notoriety among the people, so that when they gather at this place — the Water Gate in Jerusalem — it is the people's request that Ezra be brought to read this Book of the Law of Moses to them.

This meeting — it's obviously been planned. It may look spontaneous as you transition from the closing verse of chapter 7 into the first verse of chapter 8, but there's no doubt been some planning here. For a start, a pulpit has been built — a pulpit that holds fourteen people. This is not just a pulpit, this is a big pulpit and a substantial pulpit that had taken a few days to put together, no doubt. The people had finished building the wall. One imagines that many of the men, for example, who had come in from outlying villages and towns spent the night in Jerusalem, and now that the work is over they have gone home for a season. At the end of chapter [7] we read that they went home, and it was only a few days before. One imagines Nehemiah said something like, "You've earned your few days rest. Go home and spend time with your wives and family and children, but be back here on the first day of the month."

You see, construction was necessary. The building of the wall was necessary. But the people of God needed more than that. Nehemiah understood that what they really needed was the Scriptures. They needed the Bible. They needed the word of God. They needed to grow. They needed to be instructed in growth and maturity in the ways of God, and the only way that you could do that would be through some kind of intensive Bible study. It's more difficult than you might imagine. They didn't have the ESV Study Bible sitting in their laps. The Bible was in scrolls, and scrolls were hard to come by. Only perhaps a few people might have ever had access to these scrolls, and at this point in the history of redemption probably that was only the priests.

But it's even more difficult than that, because the scrolls were written in the Hebrew language and these people aren't speaking Hebrew anymore. We perhaps miss the point as we read the translation in English, but much of the book of Ezra is in fact written in Aramaic and not Hebrew. Much of the book of Daniel is written in Aramaic and not Hebrew. Ever since the time of the occupation of Babylon, ever since the exile, the language of politics and economics was Aramaic, and Aramaic had begun to be taught and learnt, and no doubt there was a generation of people in Jerusalem who no longer understood Hebrew. Even Jesus, it is believed, spoke Aramaic. So you've got a translation issue.

And so Nehemiah gathers the people; bids them come on the first day of the seventh month, the month of Tishri, and they're to meet...not in the temple, perhaps for space reasons, and perhaps because women and children were also present...they meet at this location called the Water Gate. Nehemiah understands, you see, that this is not a task for him. That says something about Nehemiah. You might have expected Nehemiah to be a man who could do anything. A man of many talents, but this was not his talent, this was not his gifting. This was a gifting of another, and he must step backwards now in order that Ezra in the providence of God might step forward. And perhaps there's a lesson there. It's not the most significant lesson in the passage, to be sure, but perhaps there is a lesson there — a lesson about understanding something of the ways and the providence of God: that God may use you for a season, and then He may use someone else for a season, and all because the purposes are His and not yours.

## II. Enthusiasm.

But the second thing I want us to see is not just Ezra, but *Enthusiasm*. They gather together at the Water Gate, and you notice in verse 1 it says they “gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate.” There's evidently a measure of unanimity. They're all of one mind. They all have this zeal, they all have this focus, they all have this same determination. They gather for the same reason, men and women and children, too. They gather as one man with a collective desire to hear the word of God. They're coming together for a Bible conference.

Did Ezra and Nehemiah wonder how many would turn up? I've often asked when I speak at conferences here and there, and I see they've planned meetings for Friday night, and Saturday morning, and sometimes Saturday afternoon after lunch, and then another meeting Saturday evening...sometimes I send them an email and I say to them, “Do you really expect people to come four times on a Saturday?” And usually if they persist with that there might be half a dozen people at the last meeting! But they're all there. One gets the impression that there are thousands of people now gathered: people who lived in Jerusalem, but people who lived outside of Jerusalem in the nearby towns and villages, and they'd come with one purpose and with one intention: to hear the word of God. They want Bible. They want Scripture. They want Ezra to read the Scriptures to them. They're thirsty for the word of God. There's an enthusiasm for the Bible.

And there's a pulpit. In verse 4, the Hebrew word is a *tower*. And in verse 5, we read that Ezra was above the people, so it's built in such a way that everyone could see him. “Six feet above contradiction,” we say about a pulpit. But there's something significant and something important about a pulpit. I remember being asked to speak at a church — I won't identify it. I was asked to speak one

Sunday morning. The minister was sick, I think, and I got a telephone call would I go and preach there that morning, and I did. And there was no pulpit. There wasn't even anything that resembled a pulpit. There was nothing at all. There wasn't even a music stand! Nothing! I inquired. The church had been in existence for a couple of years. It was a church plant, and I wondered, "Where's the pulpit?" And I was told there was no pulpit. "We don't need a pulpit." And I said, "Yes, you do need a pulpit!" [*Laughter.*] "And you need a concrete pulpit that cannot be moved!" I said. Actually there's an important lesson about the architectural importance of the pulpit and why the pulpit [at last!] is in the center of the building. [*Laughter.*] It's good Presbyterian church polity.

You notice this day began with worship. It began with a blessing, and it began with the people saying "Amen" and lifting up their holy hands and bowing their heads, and worshiping their Lord with their faces to the ground. Then you notice in verse 3 that as the word was read, "the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law." What an extraordinary thing that is. What a wonderful thing that is, that Ezra in this book records that. Everyone was paying attention to the reading of the word. No sleepyheads here. No one glancing at their watches here. They're attentive. There's an enthusiasm. They're eager to hear the word of God. Men and women and the youth are there. There was no announcement of goldfish swallowing at the Fish Gate, so that the youth didn't have to come to this meeting. No, if they were capable of understanding, they were there, too. The word of God was for everybody, and there's part of the covenant nature of worship — men and women and those capable of understanding would gather together, and they were attentive to the reading of Scripture.

Now, there's something unusual about this. I don't mean to jest about that, but there's something unusual about that. You look around an average congregation — and ours is no different — sometimes during the course of worship, and it's not always the case, is it, that everybody is paying attention to the word of God. There are beautiful moments (and preachers especially are conscious when those moments come) when it seems to be that you could hear a pin drop and everybody is paying attention to the word of God and eager to hear what God is saying to their hearts and souls, but those are precious moments, and they're given, I think, by the Holy Spirit. But here the ears of all the people were attentive to the word of God.

Now, how much of the word of God was read? You took note, of course, that this meeting began in the early morning and finished at mid-day. This is a five-hour, perhaps a six-hour meeting. They are standing the whole time. There's no coffee break. To be sure, I don't think we're meant to understand that the whole of that time Ezra is reading the Scriptures. There are a group of Levites (thirteen of them are mentioned), Levites who are going amongst the crowd in various groups, and they too are reading and they too are explaining. And so for this five-, perhaps six-hour period, the word of God is being read and it's being translated, and it's being expounded in some way. It would be impossible that the whole of the Book

of the Law (and that of course refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament from Genesis through to Deuteronomy)... it would be impossible in that time frame to have read all five books, and one gets the impression that what was being done was reading certain sections of those books.

And they stood for the reading of Scripture. Kidner says “they stood as if they were instinctively aware that they needed to give God royal authority, and therefore stand at the reading of Scripture.” Now the church has never seen that as a prescription that in worship we should always stand. I know some of our brothers and sisters in our own denomination stand for the reading of Scripture, and they’re perfectly entitled to do that, but there’s no prescription as such in Scripture to do that. It’s interesting, for example, that Mary sat at Jesus’ feet while He taught in Luke 10, and Baruch sat as he read the Scriptures in the temple in Jeremiah 36. There’s enthusiasm here.

### **III. Exposition.**

But, thirdly, there’s *Exposition*. There’s exposition (verse 8):

“They read from the Book of the Law of God clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

There’s a little bit of a disagreement among the Hebrew scholars as to quite what is being said in verse 8, and there are several possible renditions of it. It could be that when it says “they gave the sense” that it might just refer to the act of translation from the Hebrew into Aramaic. Or, it might mean the practice of breaking down the Scriptures into sizeable chunks, the beginning of lectionary readings, as some have suggested. But the ESV has taken us along the more traditional interpretation of this word, meaning that what was taking place was exposition. They were expounding the Scriptures. They were not just reading the Scriptures, but the reading of Scripture — and do note that the reading of Scripture is a part of worship. The reading of Scripture is an element of worship, as much an element of worship as preaching; as much an element of worship as the singing of the praises of God, to be given all due attention at all times.

But what did they do with this word? It wasn’t sufficient just to read it, although to read it was an act of worship. The word needed to be explained. The word needed to be expounded. Alistair Begg cites a story from William Still from Gilcomston South congregation in Aberdeen. A man was visiting his congregation one day and said to him at the door the kind of thing that preachers always love to hear. “You don’t preach,” he said to William Still. Taken aback, William Still said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, all you do is read the Bible and explain it.” To which William Still said, “That is preaching.” Well, that’s precisely what’s taking place here. They’re reading and expounding the Scriptures.

What an extraordinary day this must have been — a five-, six-hour meeting in which the Torah, the Book of the Law of Moses, was read and translated and expounded. And you sense something of the excitement and enthusiasm among the people. It had been perhaps a long time since they'd experienced anything quite like this.

#### **IV. Application.**

Now there are two things I want to say by way of application tonight. This is a revival. This is unusual. By any standards this is an unusual occurrence. I think it tells us that we ought to long for a day like this. We ought to pray for such days, for the revival and reformation of the church. Now, we don't despise the day of small things. We don't want to be as those folk in the time of Ezra when the second temple was completed. You remember they wept when they saw it because it didn't have the glory of Solomon's temple. We don't want to be like that. We want to be true to the providence of God and the day and age in which we live, but don't you long just a little for glory days? Days of extraordinary blessing?

You know, there's no advertising here. There's no gimmick here. There are no feats of acrobatics displayed in the square at the Water Gate to attract the people to come in. The only thing that attracted them was the prospect that the word of God would be read and expounded. Oh, for such days! Days like the Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century! Days like the Great Awakening in the 1730's and '40's in Britain, and in New England...days like the days in the Second Great Awakening, when in various parts of this nation God came down, and came down in extraordinary blessing and revived His people and gave to them a thirst and a longing, and a desire to hear the unadulterated word of God read and expounded. We want, you and I, to be men and women of the Book — of one Book. What this passage is saying is that the most important thing in all of our lives is the Bible. If we want to know the way of salvation, if we want to know how to be a Christian, if we want to know how to live our lives in this world, if we want to know the answer to a thousand questions, the answer lies in the Scriptures.

We want, then, a greater faith. Yes, that's my second application: to have a greater faith in the power of Scripture. What is it that this world needs tonight? Well, let me put it to you in a different way. If reformation would come again (our friend, Ric Cannada, always signs off his letters "For a new reformation"), what would it look like? You want a new reformation; what would it look like? What would bring about a new reformation? Ezra's answer, Nehemiah's answer, this chapter's answer is that Scripture will do that. The Bible, which is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, dividing asunder the joints and the marrow, the soul and the spirit, the Bible will do that. There's nothing fancy



here, just Scripture. Just plain old common garden reading, and reading clearly and reading with sense of what is contained in the Bible.

What would a new reformation look like? It would look like the days in Geneva, when in Easter in 1538, Calvin at the close of the service walked out of the city of Geneva. He was banished from the city by the city fathers. Over three years later, in September of 1541, he returned and entered into the church and into the pulpit on that first Sunday morning, and began to preach at the very point where he had left off three and a half years before. He was giving testimony, do you see, to the power of Scripture and to the place of Scripture, and to the place of preaching and expository preaching in the life and communion of the people of God.

Well, may we see such days. Let's pray together.

*Father, we are grateful with all of our hearts for that which remains. We thank You for days when we have Bibles in our own hands, wonderful translations and wonderful study aids, and tools to understand the Scriptures. But we do believe with all of our hearts in the propriety of the means of grace and of worship and of reading of Scripture, and of expounding Scripture. And we pray that You would kindle in our hearts tonight — in all of our hearts — a unanimity of thought and aspiration that through such means great power comes, power from yourself and the outpouring of Your Spirit. We long for Your blessing, O Lord, as we give You thanks for that which we have, and pray for the advancement of Your kingdom. And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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