

# CAPITOL STUDIES

MARCH 2, 2022 • WEEK 10



## NEHEMIAH: THE CIVIL SERVANT FROM SUSA

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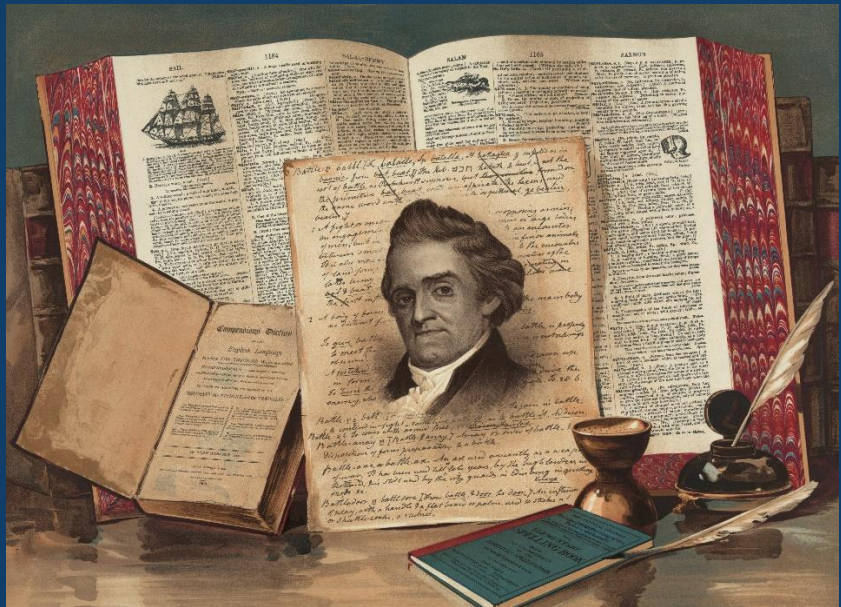


### *Verse of the Week*

Nehemiah 8:6

*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.*

## Nehemiah: The Builder with Revival



ON DECEMBER 20, 1808, NOAH WEBSTER wrote in a letter to Thomas Dawes: "About a year ago, an unusual revival of religion took place in New Haven... and I was led by a spontaneous impulse of repentance, prayer, and entire submission of myself to my Maker and Redeemer. In the month of April last, I made a profession of faith." This unusual revival was a part of the Great Awakening that shook America in the early 19th Century. As evidenced in his textbook, *History of the United States*, published in 1832, Webster believed that Christianity and government could not and should not be separated: "The religion which has introduced civil liberty is the religion of Christ and His apostles, which enjoins humility, piety, and benevolence; which acknowledges in every person, a brother or a sister, and a citizen with equal rights. This is genuine Christianity, and to this we owe our free constitutions of government."<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Noah Webster was also quoted as saying this: “Every civil government is based upon some religion or philosophy of life. Education in a nation will propagate the religion of that nation. In America, the foundational religion was Christianity. And it was sown in the hearts of Americans through the home and private and public schools for centuries. Our liberty, growth, and prosperity was the result of a Biblical philosophy of life. Our continued freedom and success is dependent on our educating the youth of America in the principles of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bible is the foundation stone upon which our constitutional republic is built. United States Senator Daniel Webster “stressed the importance of a proper foundation on which to establish a new society. Having observed the trend of history he pointed out that ‘there is no solid basis for civilization but the Word of God. If we abide by the principles taught in the Bible, our country will go on prospering.... The Bible is a book... which teaches man his own individual responsibility, his own dignity, and his equality with his fellowman.’ The importance of the Word of God in the lives of the people in the early history of the United States was boldly affirmed by Thomas Jefferson. He said, ‘The Bible is the cornerstone of liberty.’ Andrew Jackson claimed, ‘The Bible is the rock on which our Republic rests.’”<sup>3</sup>

Nehemiah records for us the significance of the Bible in the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. They were not just building a city for God; they were building a people for God. The revival of God’s Word greatly impacted those who had returned from captivity.

## I. THE EXPOSITION OF THE LAW WHICH BRINGS REVIVAL

### A. Eagerness for the Word of God

*Nehemiah 8:1-3*

*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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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.<sup>4</sup>*

When did this take place? Verse 2 indicates it was in “the seventh month” (Tishri in the Hebrew calendar), which was mid-September through mid-October. During this time of harvest, the Jews traditionally celebrated several feasts in thanksgiving for God’s goodness. It had been many years since these feasts were held, and now they were being reinstated. The Jews observed the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25), the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32), and the Feast of



Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-43). Jewish people from all around left their cities to gather at Jerusalem to hear the Word of the LORD (YHWH) and praise Him with thanksgiving.

Parents and children who were old enough to understand (comprehend) made up this large crowd. They wanted to know God’s instructions for them now that they were back in Zion, the city of their God. In a large open area on the eastern side of the Water Gate by the Gihon well, they gathered. They asked Ezra to bring the scrolls (books) of Moses or what is commonly called the *Torah*. Very few would have had access to Hebrew scrolls of the Bible at that time, so they longed to hear the Scriptures. Their hearts were focused on the Word of God. From morning until noon, they listened. The Word of God was at the center of their considerations now that the wall was finished. It was the inspired Truth which is beneficial for every believer in every age.

How many Bibles do you have? Do you take for granted how easy it is to own a Bible? Is God’s Word the center of your life?

## B. Explanation of the Word of God

*Nehemiah 8:4-8*

*Ezra 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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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 worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup>Also 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. <sup>8</sup>They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.*

These listeners made up a crowd estimated to number between 30,000 and 50,000 people. “Ezra read sections of the Law in the presence of **all the people** (v. 3), and then at certain times **the Levites** circulated among them and made it **clear** (*pāraš*, ‘to make distinct or interpret,’ possibly means here ‘to translate’ from Hebrew to Aramaic) and explained (gave **the meaning** of) what Ezra had read as the people stood in groups (vv. 7-8).”<sup>5</sup> They explained the Law and applied it to the people’s lives. Biblical exposition has been important from the earliest times. God ordained this method to help believers grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:18). It is vital that Christians attend churches where the Scriptures are preached and taught in an expositional manner.

This Jewish assembly “was not held in the Temple court, where the altar was the focal point, but at one of the centres of city life, the kind of place where God’s wisdom pleads most urgently to be heard (Proverbs 1:20ff.;





8:1ff.). The law itself insisted that its voice must not be confined to the sanctuary but heard in the house and the street (Deuteronomy 6:7ff.)”<sup>6</sup> In today’s desperate times, we need to be sure we are bringing God’s Word where it is most needed.

Ezra preached from a platform (from the Latin *pulpitum* meaning “stage” or “pulpit”) so that he could be easily seen and heard. The early American evangelist George Whitefield carried his own “pulpit” with him when he preached in the thirteen colonies. He was instrumental in America’s first Great Awakening (revival). Sometimes Whitefield’s crowds numbered up to 100,000 or more people. Many of our founding fathers heard Whitefield preach. Biblical principles permeated their thinking. A Biblically moral and ethical mindset or “worldview” marked the colonies before America’s struggle for independence. Is this the worldview we see in America today?

Ezra led the congregation in prayer, and the people responded with hearty “Amen’s” (so be it!). Ezra blessed their great God, and the assembly joined with him in prayer. Notice that they lifted their hands in prayer, then bowed with their faces to the ground. They humbly declared their utter dependence upon God. The key to effective prayer is not the position—standing, lifting hands, kneeling, laying prostrate—but instead the heart attitude. How is your prayer life?

## II. THE EFFICACY OF THE WORD OF GOD WHICH FACILITATES REVIVAL

*Nehemiah 8:9-12*

*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. <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” <sup>12</sup>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.*

The people heard convicting words and felt guilty for their sin. They had disobeyed the Law and disappointed the LORD. They were broken and repentant with real sorrow of soul, so they wept. But Nehemiah and Ezra encouraged them to make these feast days times of joyous celebration for everyone, especially the less fortunate. They were reminded that “the joy of the LORD [was] their strength.” This word for strength can refer to a strong tower, a place where the child of God can go for safety and security. Peace and security come when Christians find their joy and hope in Christ. As a Christian, my identity is in the LORD who loves me and gave Himself for me. What significance does that truth have? It means that my identity is not simply found in my failures and sin but rather in Christ, the One Who paid for my sin.



Similarly, the Day of Atonement feast was to remind the Jews that their sins, once confessed and forsaken, were covered by the blood of the sacrifice and thoroughly forgiven. The resulting freedom from guilt and penalty brought rejoicing. They became true worshippers as they understood God's Truth. The powerful and moving festival became a springboard to a fuller understanding of the longed-for Messiah Who would once-for-all pay sin's punishment. This expectation and hope produced joy, which spilled over into the lives of everyone at all levels of society. Oh, that this would happen again! The goal of preachers today should be to make the truth so understood that it cannot be misunderstood.

### III. THE OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD THAT PROVES REVIVAL

*Nehemiah 8:13-18*

*Then 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. <sup>14</sup>They 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. <sup>15</sup>So 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." <sup>16</sup>So 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. <sup>17</sup>The 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. <sup>18</sup>He 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.*

There is a beautiful simplicity here: "They found it written in the Torah" (v. 14). "So the people went out" (v. 16). When the people heard God's Word, they did not question or complain; they simply obeyed. What a good example for believers today! "But prove yourselves doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22). How are you doing at obeying God's Word?

In the Feast of Tabernacles, Israel was forced to recall the former hand-to-mouth existence of Israel while in the wilderness. For seven days they lived in flimsy booths made of leaves and branches, reminding them of how fragile life was. Though they were in the middle of a harvest festival, they needed to remember that life could be a wilderness. Their only sustainer was Yahweh, whether He did it through manna or harvest.<sup>7</sup> They rejoiced as they heard God's promises read to them each day. We have the same Sustainer today: "And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).





## CONCLUSION

The sequence in chapter 8 is striking: intellectual (mind) response to the Word (vv. 1–8), emotional (heart) response to the Word (vv. 9–12), and volitional (will/action) response to the Word (vv. 13–18).<sup>8</sup> “The move to make the Scripture the guiding principle of Jewish life was powerfully initiated. The great teaching operation on the first day of the month, the training session which had followed it, and now the seven days of readings at the festival had exposed the people to the fundamentals of their faith with considerable thoroughness.”<sup>9</sup> God’s Word offered them everything they needed to live their lives with God’s blessing.

“We are saved by hearing, then applying the Word of God to our hearts and lives (1 Peter 1:23). We are given faith by hearing (Romans 10:17). We are made clean by applying and heeding the Word of God (John 17:17; 15:3). We are edified by the Word (Acts 20:32). We are led by the Word (Psalm 119:105). We are successful in our lives through the power of the Word in our lives (Joshua 1:8-9). We are fruitful as God uses His Word in our lives and through our lives to touch others (Psalm 1:2-3).”<sup>10</sup>

- 1) How strong is your desire to hear more of the Word of God?
- 2) How do people show respect or disrespect for the Word of God?
- 3) The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit gives understanding of God’s Word to Christians. What other things might help Christians grow in understanding?
- 4) How do you think the joy of the LORD gives strength?

“Someone asked evangelist Billy Sunday if revivals lasted, and he replied, ‘No, neither does a bath; but it’s good to have one occasionally!’ From time to time in the history of the church, God’s Spirit has burdened people to pray, search the Scriptures, and confess their sins; and from these sincere spiritual exercises, He has seen fit to bring fresh life to His people. It happened in Nehemiah’s day, and it can happen again today. Can God begin with you?”<sup>11</sup>

Pastor Arin Hess

## FOOTNOTES

1. Noah Webster’s quotes taken from <http://www.faithofourfathers.net/webster.html>
2. *Ibid.*
3. Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, Loizeaux Brothers, 1976, pg. 122.
4. All Scripture quotations, unless noted, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*.



