

## CHAPTER 8

# Spiritual Renewal Through The Word

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*”For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”*

*1 Peter 1:23*

Chapter Eight portrays the celebration of the Rosh Hashanah and Succos (*Sukkot*) festivals. This served as the catalyst for the repentance described in chapter 9, which in turn will lead to the declaration of the Covenant in chapter 10.

*Rosh Hashanah* marks the first in a ten-day period of evaluation and spiritual renewal, known as the *days of awe*. It is followed by the Succos celebration, when the sense of inner satisfaction and fulfillment engendered by the renewal experience is expressed in joyous festivity.

Considering the events previously recorded in Nehemiah, these holidays took on even greater meaning. *Rosh Hashanah* assumed a uniquely communal significance, inasmuch as the people found themselves gathered as one man (v. 1) in their holy city. On this Day of Judgment the community examined itself and could find nothing but a pale reflection of its former greatness. The people wept (v. 9), but their leaders reinvigorated them with the reminder that *Rosh Hashanah* was a day for Jews to be confident in God’s favorable judgment of them.

Two weeks later the Succos celebration began, with an added element of special joy. For the first time since its destruction, Jerusalem had been restored as the center of Jewish life. The Temple Mount again served as the focus of Jewish prayer and service. The words of the prophet Amos (9:11) held significance, “In that day I will raise the fallen Succah [i.e., Temple] of David”. Little wonder that from the days of Joshua (v.

17), the *mitzvah* (commandment) of succah had not been fulfilled on a comparable level.

Nehemiah 8 challenges our complacent approach to the Bible and our tendency to associate God’s law with grudging obedience. After a mysterious thirteen-year absence, Ezra reappears to lead the people into spiritual renewal. God’s people finally had adequate physical protection; now the time had come for spiritual building.

Nehemiah 8-11 seems to interrupt the flow of the restoration work of the wall. Several scholars believe that Nehemiah 8 once stood between Ezra 8 and Ezra 9.

## **I. Spiritual Renewal comes by Hearing God’s Word (1-8)**

**Verse 1** *All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.*

“All the people came together as one” is identical with Ezra 3:1. This refers to the gathering of the assembly with one mind in the seventh month of the year. The purpose of this gathering was to restore the altar of the burnt offerings and renew sacrificial worship.

“In the square before the Water Gate,” the gate which led to the Gihon Spring, may have been the large space before the house of the Lord (Ezra 10:9). Assemblies were held by the city gates (cf. Judges 19:15; 2 Chron. 32:6). Broad plazas have been uncovered by archeologists.

There have been at least four views about what “the Book of the Law of Moses” represented:

- a. A collection of legal materials
- b. The priestly code
- c. Deuteronomical laws
- d. The Pentateuch (Don and I personally support this view)

Since the return from captivity, the people had not gathered for any reason. Now they swiftly assembled at the eastern side of the city facing the temple, awaiting the words of Ezra and Nehemiah. They were now a community committed to return to the Jewish life of obedience and reverence for God. The Book of the Law had been ignored, but now its reading would show them their guilt and lead them to repentance. It was called the Law of Moses, a name given by God.

**Verse 2** *So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.*

Rosh Hashanah (The Feast of the Trumpets) is always on the first day of Tishrei (*Tishri*), the first month of the Jewish year (the seventh when counting from Nisan). The whole assembly come together as Sabbath, cessation from labor.

The Jewish New Year marks the anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve, a day of judgment and coronation, with the sounding of the *shofar*, as well as a day of remembrance and a day of judgment. Children old enough to understand the words being read were included with the men and women.

**Verse 3** *He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.*

“Day break” (*haor*) means “light” (cf. Gen. 44:3; Judges 16:2; 19:26; Isa. 58:8). The KJV translates the word as “morning.” The people were very eager to listen the Word of God, and they listened to the exposition of the Scriptures for about five hours. I relate this to listening to a Bible study taught by old Indian pastors from morning, afternoon, and evening for a week.

The *Torah* was read from daybreak to midday to provide the spiritual fulfillment gained by study and prayer. The rest of the day was set aside for the *mitzvah* of rejoicing and partaking of food and drink for all. The poor were to be supplied food and drink so they could participate in the festivities. The Courtyard of the Women could have been where they met, or outside in the plaza, a large flat space.

**Verse 4** *Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah and Maaseiyah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.*

“Platform” (*Migdal*) means a “tower.” Here it means a “*dais*,” a platform capable of holding Ezra and thirteen others. The high wooden platform was built so that his voice would project and all the people listening would see and hear him.

On his right side stood six men, on his left, seven. They included “Shema,”

a shortened form of Shemaiah, and “Anaiah” (Yahweh has answered), one of those who signed the covenant. “Mishael” (Who is what God is?) was also the name of one of Daniel’s friends. “Hashbaddanah,” meaning “Yahweh has considered men,” is only found here. These men were standing with Ezra to honor him, as approvers and supporters of the truth of what he read, and to relieve him whenever he became weary.

**Verse 5** *Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.*

The “book” was a scroll rather than a codex or book as we think of it. At that time it was required that people stand silently while the Torah was being read. That does not apply today as a law, but is sometimes done out of respect. Everyone needs to listen silently during the reading of Scripture.

**Verse 6** *Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

“Praise the Lord” is literally “Blessed be the Lord.” According to Jewish tradition, a benediction is pronounced before reading each scriptural section. The Jews customarily “lifted their hands” in worship (cf Ezra 9:5; Ps. 28:2; 134:2; 1 Tim. 2:8).

Before reading from God’s law, Ezra first prayed. His words of praise (blessing) to the Lord, the Great God (the name only used by the priests one day a year in the temple, on *Yom Kippur*), expressed thanksgiving for God’s protection, for their return to Jerusalem, and for the rebuilding of the wall. All the people agreed and offered their amens, meaning “this is true, I believe it.”

“Bowed down” (*qadad*) occurs fifteen times in the O.T. It is always followed by the verb “to worship.” The KJV renders it “bowed their heads;” it may mean “kneel down.”

In humility and reverence they bowed down, bending at the waist while kneeling until their faces touched the ground, arms and legs outstretched, as though they were not worthy to look up.

**Verse 7** *The Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah--instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.*

“Jamin” means “right hand” or “good luck.” “Hodiah” means “Yahweh

is splendor.” “Pelah” is “Yahweh has acted wonderfully.” The Levites, descendants of Jacob’s son Levi, were selected to serve God in the holy temple. Most served in peripheral roles, playing music, opening and closing the gates, and standing guard. In the case of the portable tabernacle (which preceded the Holy Temple in Jerusalem), they were responsible for packing up, transporting, and reconstructing the tabernacle whenever the Israelites traveled to a new camp. The most sacred tasks, including bringing the sacrifices, were reserved for the *kohanim* (priests), descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses (Deuteronomy 33:10).

“Instructed” literally means “causing to understand” (cf. Ezra 8:16; Ps. 119:34, 73; Isa. 40:14).

**Verse 8** *They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.*

“They read” is from “*qara*” which means “to call, proclaim.” Here it means “to read aloud.” Reading in the ancient world was typically done aloud (Acts 8:28). “Making it clear” renders “distinctly,” translated “clearly” by the KJV and RSV.

When the Torah was read in public, scholars would be present to help the people understand the reading, as well as the translator, who would repeat each verse in Aramaic, the language understood by all the people. According to Jewish scholars, Ezra instituted the custom of using the *turgeman* (translator). It was also thought that the Oral Law required more interpretation than the written Law.

## II. Spiritual Renewal Flows from Response to the Word (9-12)

**Verse 9** *Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.*

When the Word of God is expounded, deep conviction of sin and repentance comes upon the hearers, which leads to joy and spiritual renewal. Their weeping was attributed to grief over their sin. In the Beatitudes, Jesus states, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4). He was referring to the grief sinners feel for the distance they have placed between themselves and God. They mourn for a right relationship with God. These returning captives had abandoned their God, and they knew it.

**Verse 10** *Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”*

“Choice food” means delicious, festive food prepared with much fat. Another Hebrew word for “fat” (*heleb*) is used metaphorically for the “best” in Numbers 18:12, 39-30, 32 and “finest” in Psalm 81:16 and 147:14.

“Sweet drinks” (*mamtaqqim*) occurs only here and as “sweetness” in Song of Songs 5:16. “Send some to those who have nothing prepared” reflects the Jewish tradition of extending kindness to help those who are poor during these joyful occasions (2 Sam. 6:19; Esth. 9:22; 1 Cor. 11:20-22). This is a good thing for us to do as followers of Christ in order to represent Christ’s love and compassion. I wrote this portion during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 while sitting in the campus of the Mission India Theological Seminary in Nagpur, India. Millions of daily laborers in India are struggling without food and daily necessities. Christians, including our Mission India ministry, have been showing compassion to those who are less fortunate.

“Joy” (*hedwah*) is found only here and in 1 Chron. 16:27. “Strength” (*maoz*) means “stronghold/fortress” (cf. Ps. 27:1; 37: 39; Jer. 16:19).

Nehemiah assured the people that Rosh Hashanah marked a new beginning. They have been forgiven and redeemed, and their relationship with God has been restored. Celebrate! This day is the joy of the Lord, the source of your strength. They are given instructions on how to celebrate, eat, drink, and give to neighbors.

**Verse 11** *The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”*

“Be still” (*hassu*) means “hush,” “be quiet,” as in Judges 3:19.

The Levites, in their leadership role, comforted and soothed the people, affirming Nehemiah’s words. This was a day they had not celebrated in a long time. They needed to be reminded of its significance in their lives, and all God had provided them, especially His forgiveness and restoration.

**Verse 12** *Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

The day after the *Sukkoth* week (Tabernacles), the Jews celebrate a festival called *Simhat Torah* (“rejoicing over the Torah”), in which they paraded in a circle for seven or more rounds inside the synagogue, with a different person holding the scrolls of the Torah each time. Children carried flags with inscriptions extolling the Word of God.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone was entitled to celebrate, so food was sent to those who did not have any. This marked the beginning of their obedience to follow the Law’s instruction to care for others. They responded to a need that was presented, which gave receivers as well as themselves great joy. Deuteronomy 16:11-14 records, “*And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns.*”

### **III. Spiritual Renewal Brings Passion to Study the Word (13)**

**Verse 13** *On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law.*

The Torah designates one day only, the first of *Tishrei*, as Rosh Hashanah (Leviticus 23:24-25). In Biblical and Talmudic times, the first day of the new month was fixed by the Supreme court in Jerusalem, based on the testimony of witnesses who had sighted the new moon. Each month lasted at least twenty-nine days. However, when witnesses failed to appear on the thirtieth day, the day was incorporated into the old month, now swollen with the extra day, and the new month began on the thirty-first day. Since it was generally assumed that the witnesses would appear on the thirtieth day, Rosh Hashanah was celebrated after twenty-nine days of *Elul* had passed.

During the period described here in Nehemiah, however, the witnesses did not appear on the thirtieth day. Thus that day belonged to *Elul*, and the new year did not begin until the thirty-first day. The people gathered again on the second day, which was the first day of *Tishrei*, for a repetition of the *Rosh Hashanah* celebration (Rashi, Beitzah 6a, Rosh Hashanah 19b, see Rambam, Kiddush HaChodesh 5:7, 8; cf. Haamek She’elah, Ki Savo, She’ilta 158).

<sup>1</sup> Expositor’s Commentary p. 726

This time, only the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered to learn with great concentration so that they might understand fully the words written in the Law.

#### **IV. Spiritual Renewal Leads to Celebration (14-18)**

**Verse 14** *They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month.*

“Temporary shelters” translates as “booths” in the KJV – booths made out of branches. The Feast of Booths, which is sometimes called The Feast of Tabernacles or simply *Sukkoth*, begins on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (in early fall, Lev. 23:34). It includes days of rest, special offerings, feasting on newly harvested fruits, and living in booths for seven days (Lev. 23:42). By living in temporary shelters of brush and sticks, the Israelites remembered the sojourning of their ancestors in the wilderness (Lev. 23:43). It is like our church family camps in the rural communities of India.

**Verse 15** *and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”--as it is written.*

Lev 23:40 records, “On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees—from palms, willows and other leafy trees—and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days.” Willows were omitted from Neh. 8:15.

The olive tree is widespread in Mediterranean countries. It takes around thirty years for an olive tree to mature, and it requires healthy conditions.

“Tree of oil” (*es semen*) is commonly regarded as the “wild olive tree.” The KJV renders the phrase as “pine.”

“Myrtles” are evergreen bushes with a pleasing odor (Is. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:8, 10-11). “Palms” (from *tamar*) are date palms (cf. Exod. 15:27; Lev. 23:40). Such trees were common around Jericho. “Shade trees” literally means literally “leafy trees” (Ezek. 6:13; 20:28).

Later, Jewish celebrations of the Feast of Booths included the waving with right hand of the “*lulav*”, made of branches of palms, myrtles, and willows, and the holding in the left hand of the *ethrog*, a citrus native to Palestine.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 727

The heads of the families and the priests were to announce this to the people so they could build booths. The leaved branches were to be used for the roofs.

**Verse 16** *So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim.*

Although celebrated for the first time in a secure city, Yom Kippur wasn't mentioned. It is supposed to be celebrated in roofs, courtyards, or any open area on private property. Clause states that exceptions were made to accommodate everyone, or to increase the celebration.

**Verse 17** *The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.*

“From the days of Joshua son of Nun” simply means that the feast had not been celebrated before with such exceptional joyousness or strictness of observance.<sup>3</sup> The people of Israel experienced joy at the renewal of the Passover under King Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30:26) and at the revival under Josiah (2 Kings 23:22; 2 Chronicles 35:18).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, in the midst of fear and uncertainties, we the followers of Christ have reason to be joyful and hopeful in every situation, because of the promises of our God that He will be with us always (Isaiah 43:1, 2). Paul wrote in Philippians 4:4-7, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

We can rejoice because of who our God is. He is sovereign, He is our Savior, and He is our strength. He is near to us always because His name is Emmanuel. So, we must be gentle to one another in the face of uncertainties. We approach God with prayer, petition and thanksgiving and He will guard (*phroureó*) our hearts and minds with His peace.

**Verse 18** *Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 728

“Assembly” (*seret*) is a “solemn or festal assembly” (cf. Lev. 23:36; Num. 29:35; Deut. 16:8; 2 Kings 10:20; Joel 1:14).

Each day Ezra read a portion of the Law that was appropriate for that day. The people celebrated, offered sacrifices, lived in their *succahs* for seven days, then joined together in an assembly to end the time of celebration, with hearts filled with joy, a new year to look forward to, and a safe, sanctified environment in which to live. All their hard work had brought them to this point, none of which could have happened without Nehemiah’s leadership and vision, the reading of the Law by Ezra, and the people committing their lives to the one true God, their God.

## **Conclusion and Application**

Throughout this chapter the understanding of God’s Law is highlighted. When they understood the Word, they celebrated it. Likewise, we must give high priority for God’s Word in our lives and ministries. It is a living Word, one that changes our lives (1 Peter 3:16-17). We must respect God’s Word, meditate on it, preach it, and practice it. The goal of understanding the Word is to grow spiritually by obeying everything Christ commanded us. We must share the living, transforming Word with others. Unfortunately today, most believers just keep the Word for themselves and do not share it with others. Even many in ministry fail to follow Paul’s exhortation to Timothy to “Preach the Word...” (2 Tim. 4:2).

God’s Law tells us what to do and what not to do. It is given to enrich, not to ruin our lives. When we understand God’s truth, when it affects our hearts and impacts our lives, then we will experience fullness of joy. Then we will “eat the fat” and “drink the sweet” of God’s kingdom in anticipatory celebration of the world to come.<sup>4</sup>



*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*

*(2 Timothy 2:16-17)*



<sup>4</sup> The Communicator’s Commentary on Nehemiah PP.244

## Discussion Questions

1. Read verses 1-4 of chapter 8. Who Was Ezra? (Ezra 7:10) What were the three things that he did relative to God's Word? How do those apply to your ministry?
2. What did the Water Gate represent? (John 15:3) What was the Book of the Law of Moses? Who asked Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law? Who was in the assembly? How long did Ezra read the Book of the Law aloud? What were the peoples' attitudes? What was the result of their attitude? (Psalm 1:2-3, Matthew 13:23)
3. Why did all of the people weep as they listened to the words of the Law? (8:9-12; Jeremiah 3:21, Romans 3:20, Luke 22:61-62) Why did Nehemiah tell the people to stop weeping and to be joyful? (Rev. 21:4, Jer. 31:13, 2 Cor. 7:10)
4. How did Ezra begin his time of teaching from God's Word (8:6)? Discuss how you can properly acknowledge God as you open His Word.
5. How can you grow in your salvation, and what is the result of your spiritual growth? (1 Peter 2:1-3)
6. What hinders us from experiencing spiritual revival in our churches?