

Studying to Understand

September 18, 2022

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Nehemiah 8:1-8

Session Outline

1. Get in the Word (Nehemiah 8:1-3)
2. Receive the Word (Nehemiah 8:4-6)
3. Understand the Word (Nehemiah 8:7-8)

Theological Theme

Believers should seek to know and understand the Bible in a real and practical way. Because the Word is living and active, it applies to life today and is necessary for Christ followers to know how to live in a way that pleases God.



Leader Guide

Studying to Understand

Introduction

When you have a baby, you are responsible for everything about that little human. You have to feed, bathe, clothe, and protect him or her. As your little one grows up, he or she will start to do more on their own as they are able. One of the tasks of a parent is to recognize what a child should be responsible for on an increasing level until eventually they are feeding, dressing, bathing and even at some point supporting himself or herself. That is what it means to grow and mature as a person.

Growing and maturing as a Christian follows along the same kind of track. At first when you choose Jesus, you rely on other people to teach you what God's Word says and what it means to be a Christ follower. As you grow and mature, you begin to take on more of that responsibility. Though you will always need other people in community and fellowship, you should start to be a self-feeder of the Word of God. Having pastors, teachers, and leaders teach you the Bible is important. But it is also important for every believer to learn to read and understand the Word personally. You will be amazed at what the Holy Spirit can teach you when you get into the Word in this way.

- ❓ Why does it matter if you read the Word of God and understand it on your own?
- ❓ What is one of the difficulties you face when studying the Bible on your own?

Session Summary

At this point in the book of Nehemiah, the people were back from captivity and grateful for that mercy from God. They were gathered and sought Ezra, the priest, to read aloud the Word of God to them. When God's people recognize His good hand on them the response should be one of love, thanksgiving, and gratitude. These all can be powerful motivators to seek after God and to know more of what He has to say and what He desires. That is the scene Nehemiah wrote about in chapter 8.

The lesson for believers today is pertinent to the world we live in. Because our culture is loud and confusing, at times it can be tough to know what to believe. That is why anyone who is a Christ-follower should take the Bible seriously. Scripture is God's written Word for our daily lives, and it is our responsibility to read it, know it, understand it, and apply it.


1. Get in the Word (Nehemiah 8:1-3)

The seventh month was significant in the Jewish calendar. It was the time for specific celebrations including New Year, the Day of Atonement, and Festival of Booths. Every seven years at the Festival of Booths, God's Word was to be read aloud to all who were able to listen with understanding. As the Israelites were settling back into their towns after the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, the seventh month came, and they all gathered.

 How were the people described as they listened to Ezra read the Word of God? Why was this significant?


The people's posture to the Word indicates that the Holy Spirit was stirring them and prompting them. The fact that they asked Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses reinforces the work of the Spirit of God in the people. People are not naturally drawn to things of the Lord in their flesh nature. We don't desire to hear the Word of God read aloud unless the Spirit of the Lord is working. It is important for us to recognize that when the Holy Spirit is working, our job is to cooperate with what He is doing.

God does not force us to seek Him or listen to Him. The choice is always ours. The people had the same choice, and they made the decision to gather and listen to God's Word. This kind of moment was not a coincidence, it was God ordained. Think about how the Israelites would have felt finally being home after the time of exile, seeing their city walls rebuilt and the temple reestablished. Though they may not have realized entirely what was happening, it was obvious that God was doing a great work and they responded by gathering to honor Him with the reading of His Word.

 How do you see yourself as cooperating with what the Holy Spirit is doing? What can happen if you choose not to cooperate with what God is doing around you?


Ezra took the book of the law of Moses, which would have likely been the first five books of our Old Testament, and read from it. This portion of Scripture is also known as the Pentateuch and was God's instruction to His people on how to live as His children. Note that the people who were gathered included "all who could listen with understanding." God's Word is for all people who choose to listen, and that day Ezra read out loud for about six hours. Scripture tells us that they "listened attentively."

How is it possible to stand in an assembly and listen to Scripture being read for that long? Maybe they were so grateful to be able to participate in their festivals and traditions after having their home destroyed. Maybe they recognized how desperate they had been for God to bring them back to their beloved home. Whatever the reason, we can learn from their practice. We have no restrictions on our faith. Scripture is readily available to us in many different forms. The Bible can be our daily companion in the comfort of our own homes. We have no excuse to not be in the Word. We should seek God to know Him through His Word and make it a valuable part of our lives daily.

 Application: What do you need to do differently to make getting in the Word priority in your life?


2. Receive the Word (Nehemiah 8:4-6)

Another thing to note in this passage is the preparation that was taken so the Word could be received in the most effective way. This matters because Scripture is not just to be read or heard but it is to be received in the appropriate way. How would you feel if you gave someone the perfect gift that you knew would change their life but when they opened it, they looked at it, said thank you, and set it aside without doing anything with it? That would be frustrating and sad. When a gift is not received appropriately it hurts. Yet that is exactly what many people do with the Word of God that was given for us to know how to follow Christ with our lives. Are we receiving it in the right way?

 What can keep us from receiving God's Word appropriately?


Verse 4 says that Ezra stood on a platform. This must have been prepared in advance so that the Word could be heard by the crowd of people. This was done so that the reading of the Word would be most effective. Just as the people prepared to hear the Word, there are things we can do to prepare ourselves to receive the Word most effectively. Think about what distracts you from hearing and listening to the Word to help you see what ways you can prepare to receive it more effectively.

Some of those things can be physical like making the place we are hearing the Word conducive to easy reception. The place where we read can affect the way we hear and receive Scripture, and this is important. But the most valuable preparation we can make is internal. To be most prepared to receive the Word, we must consider our hearts and minds: choosing to focus our thoughts on the Lord; being open to change that we may need to experience; having humility to know we need help; and asking God to speak. These are all ways we can prepare ourselves to receive what we need from the Lord.

-  What is a practical way you can prepare your heart and mind to hear from God through His Word? What were some of the ways the people responded to the Word when Ezra blessed the Lord? How do these demonstrate respect for the Word?

Another factor in how the Word is received is who stands for it. Ezra was standing with the Word, but he also had other leaders with him. On both sides, Ezra had people who were standing with him in support of his ministry and the powerful work of Scripture that day. When like-minded people stand together for Scripture, it can carry great weight with others. The more leaders align themselves with the work of the ministry, the greater the effect it can have on listeners.

Continuing in these verses, we see examples of how the people demonstrated their reception of Scripture. When God's Word was opened, the people stood. Ezra, because of the platform, was visible to the crowd, and when they saw the Word of God, they showed respect. We should evaluate whether we treat Scripture with the same reverence and honor that it deserves.

-  Application: What do you feel the Lord is challenging you to do in response to this text today?

3. Understand the Word (Nehemiah 8:7-8)

It is important to note all that happened as the people gathered to hear the Word of the Lord had the end goal that the people would hear and understand it. Too many times we approach Scripture as an item to mark off a checklist. When we do, we miss out on the value of comprehending and understanding what we hear or read. God's Word is given to us so that we may be transformed into the likeness of Christ one day at a time. We will not effectively apply Scripture to our lives when we have no understanding of what it says.

Ezra and the other leaders made it a point to explain what the people heard. Their goal was understanding, and it took priority. It is okay to need help with discerning Scripture and learning what the Word means. The Holy Spirit uses other people who are spiritually mature and discerning to enable us to know the meaning of what we hear and study. It can be tough to receive God's Word because it is designed to transform us, and we often are resistant to change. Having others around us helps us to continue in understanding of and obedience to the Word when our flesh seeks to resist.

- ❓ How do you typically respond when you struggle to understand something in the Bible?
- ❓ What kinds of things make it hard to discern what God's Word is saying to you?

The goal is for all Christians to be equipped to dig into God's Word on their own and learn from the Holy Spirit. The good news is that there are some things that can help you develop the discipline of studying God's Word for understanding. Remember that when you accept Jesus, you receive the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit that helps us know and apply the Word.

- ❓ Application: Who might you ask for help in studying God's Word?

The Four Questions

Read James 1:1-8. Walk through the four questions as a group to see how this practice works in real time.

Reading the Bible to know, receive, understand, and apply it is doable for everyone. Here are four simple questions everyone can use in reading Scripture to understand and apply it.

- What does this passage say about God?
- What does this passage say about people?
- What does this passage say about relating to God and others?
- What does this passage want me to think or believe?




These questions can help discern how God is speaking to you through His Word. As we continue to ask these questions, we will gain better understanding of what God's Word is saying and how He is calling us to respond.

Conclusion

In today's text, the Israelites listened to the Word of the Lord being read aloud. The Spirit of the Lord stirred them together, and they responded in a way we can learn from. Are we paying attention to what God is doing around us? How do we respond when God stirs up ministry among us? The church is the body of Christ, and we are part of that body. One of our functions as a body is to understand God's Word and seek to help others do the same.

It is vital that we learn to respond appropriately to the Lord and His Word. Though we live in a culture that has little respect for the truth of Scripture, Christians know the Bible is the Word of God. Our attitude toward the Bible should be one of reverence and honor. As the people stood for the holy reading, so we can do things to show we love and respect God's Word. Once you have experienced the difference Scripture can make in your life, you will be more devoted to spending time reading it.

As we learned from today's passage, reading and hearing is not enough. We need to be intentional about reading the Bible for understanding so that we can apply it to our lives daily. The Holy Spirit is key to this. We can pray for discernment and help as we develop the habit and practice of reading Scripture and asking questions to help us understand. God's Word is crucial to believers who want to honor God with their lives.

-  What is an issue or a question someone in your life is asking that only God and the gospel can answer?
-  Where/To whom can you go to and help teach how to study the Scriptures with these questions?
-  How might you use these four questions to have a gospel conversation with another person?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for giving you His Word and the Holy Spirit so you can understand what the Word says and how to apply it to your life. Confess the ways you have disregarded access to the Word. Commit to being intentional about developing the habit of studying to understand Scripture going forward.

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah* by James Hamilton
- *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: Restoring the Church* by Wallace Benn
- *Be Determined* by Warren Wiersbe

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



DxD This Week

Call to Action

Memorize 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Apply the four questions to three different passages.

For Next Week

Session Title

- Studying For Transformation

Main Passages

- James 1:19-25

Session Outline

1. Receive the Word (James 1:19-21)
2. Be Hearers and Doers (James 1:22-25)
3. Be Transformed (Romans 12:1-2)

Memorize

They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.

- Nehemiah 8:8

Historical Context of Nehemiah

Purpose

The events which occurred in Ezra and Nehemiah, the rebuilt temple, the stabilizing of Jerusalem, and the Jewish community that developed, all played key roles in the life and ministry of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. The rebuilt temple may have paled in comparison to the temple that Solomon built, but it would serve the Jews for centuries until Christ removed the need for a physical temple.

Author

Ezra and Nehemiah are anonymous. Ancient Jewish sources usually credit Ezra as the author of Ezra-Nehemiah. More likely Ezra-Nehemiah was written by the “Chronicler,” the person (or persons) responsible for 1 and 2 Chronicles. Not only is Ezra-Nehemiah linked to Chronicles at its introduction (Ezr 1:1–2 = 2Ch 36:22–23), it also shares many similarities in language, terminology, themes, and perspective.

Setting

It is probably safe to assume that Ezra-Nehemiah was written soon after the conclusion of Nehemiah’s ministry. Most likely the book was written no later than 400 BC.

In Ezra-Nehemiah it is clear that Ezra came to Jerusalem first, probably in 458 BC, and that Nehemiah followed him thirteen years later, probably in 445 BC. Nehemiah made no mention of Ezra, his ministry, or his reforms. Ezra and Nehemiah appear together in only two texts (Neh 8:9; 12:36). The two events in which Ezra and Nehemiah were together were significant. In Nehemiah 8, the context is the reading of the law to the people, while in Nehemiah 12 the two joyous processions walking around the city walls in the dedication ceremony include Ezra (Neh 12:36) and Nehemiah (Neh 12:38).

Special Features

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah bear the names of the key person in each of the books. Until the third century AD, though, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were regarded as a single book. Each contains material found in the other, and they complete each other. The separation of the book in the Christian community took place through the influence of the Vulgate, the Latin translation prepared by Jerome, who, following Origen before him, separated Ezra-Nehemiah into two distinct books. In the Jewish community, Ezra and Nehemiah were not separated into two distinct books until the fifteenth-century printing of the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah is part of the third division of the canon, called the Writings (Hb ketuvim).

Extended Commentary

Nehemiah 8:1-8

7:73b–8:2 Verse 73b is awkward. The final phrase (the Israelites had settled in their towns) is so similar to v. 73a (all Israel settled in their towns) that possibly a copyist mistakenly repeated the phrase. The seventh month (Tishri) was an important time in the Jewish calendar during which several events occurred. These events included the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Booths. Every seven years at the Festival of Booths the Law was to be read to the people (Dt 31:10–12). Those who are able to listen with understanding include children of a certain age (cp. 10:28; Ezr 10:1).

8:3 It is not stated why Ezra chose to have this assembly and reading of the Law at the Water Gate rather than at the temple. Some speculate that tension between Nehemiah and the priests, some of whom were allied with Tobiah the Ammonite (6:17–19), may have encouraged Ezra and Nehemiah to have the meeting away from the temple complex. It is possible that the size of the crowd demanded a different location. Exactly what made up the book of the law has been the subject of intense discussion. Probably Ezra read the legal sections of a Pentateuch that was virtually identical to what we have today. It does not say that he read it in its entirety, but that he read out of it.

8:4 The term platform (Hb *migdal*) normally means “tower,” but it is used to designate a platform here and in 2Ch 6:13. Little is known about the men who stood on his right and his left. Usually in Ezra-Nehemiah priests and Levites are distinguished from the “laity,” so these people probably were prominent lay leaders, such as representatives from the elders or heads of families.

8:5 The phrase Ezra opened the book is a little anachronistic since the book (codex) did not appear until the Christian era. Literally the phrase is, “Ezra unrolled the scroll.” The apostle Paul specifically instructed, “Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching” (1Tm 4:13). Standing for the reading of the Word is as appropriate now as it was in Ezra’s time.

8:6 Worship for the people was not just a mental exercise, but it involved the whole worshiper, who stood, spoke, and kneeled in humility before God.

8:7 Many of the thirteen Levites who assisted Ezra were involved in the covenant renewal described in the following chapters. Eight of the thirteen took part in the public confession (9:3–5), and nine are listed as signers of the covenant (10:9–13).

8:8 The term translating is one of several possibilities in understanding the Hebrew term (*parash*). This verb’s basic meaning is “to separate” or “to distinguish”, reflected in the practice of the Jewish Masoretes, who divided the text of the Hebrew Bible into sections called *parashoth*. Thus, H.G.M. Williamson translates v. 8a as, “They read from the book of the law paragraph by paragraph.” Another possible rendering is to translate the verb as “to explain, make clear,” a usage

of the term that is uncommon in Hebrew (Nm 15:34) but common in related Semitic languages (Aramaic, Syriac, Mandaean, Nabatean). The CSB translation, which understands the Levites as “translating,” is supported by the ancient Jewish tradition that the Levites were reading the Hebrew text but then providing the people with an Aramaic translation of the passage. The Jewish Talmud (b. Megillah 3a) cites this passage (Neh 8:8) as the source of the Targums, the Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew texts that became increasingly important as fewer Jewish people could read Hebrew. Targums were prepared for most of the OT books, but not for Ezra-Nehemiah or Daniel.¹

References

1. *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

Author Bio

James Hamilton (Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah)

James M. Hamilton is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. Before coming to Southern, Dr. Hamilton served as Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's Houston campus and was the preaching pastor at Baptist Church of the Redeemer. He has written *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* and, *God's Indwelling Presence: The Ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*. He has contributed chapters to many other books, and has authored many scholarly articles. He currently serves as the preaching pastor at Kenwood Baptist Church.

Wallace Benn (Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: Restoring the Church)

Wallace P. Benn is a well-known Bible teacher and preacher in the British Isles and Ireland. He is the founder of Bible by the Beach, a Bible-teaching convention in Eastbourne, England, and a trustee of Irish Church Missions, an evangelical church-planting agency in Ireland. Wallace and his wife, Lindsay, have two grown children and three grandchildren. They are members of St. Botolph's Church in Kettering, England.

Warren Wiersbe (Be Determined)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of Back to the Bible, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as "the pastor's pastor." He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.