

## Engaging with the Word

By: Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

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Scripture: Nehemiah 8: 1-12

A little background before reading this chapter. A couple of weeks back, we looked at Lamentations, the beautiful verse that talks about God's faithfulness that is new every morning. We talked about Jeremiah the prophet, who for forty years warned the children of Israel that destruction was coming, and they didn't pay attention. When destruction finally came, it came in the form of the Babylonians who took them into captivity. Jerusalem was razed to the ground; the temple was gone, homes were gone, the walls were broken and all the children of Israel were taken into captivity.

But then the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians about 539 BC. The next year they allowed the children of Israel to go back to Jerusalem. So, tens of thousands of Israelites came back to inhabit Jerusalem and Judea. They built their homes and lived there. But about forty to fifty years later, after they had rebuilt the temple, which took about twenty-five years to build, the walls were still down. They had built their homes, they had built the temple, but there were still no walls around Jerusalem. Walls were so significant in those days, for it kept marauding armies from invading the city. It was also a point of prestige to have a wall around a city.

Word got to Nehemiah that the walls were not built, and it really broke his heart because he knew how important a wall was. So he asked permission from the king to go to Jerusalem. We have looked at the book of Nehemiah some years back and we saw how he inspired the people, and together they built the wall. So, the wall is now completed, and Nehemiah has been made governor of Jerusalem and Judea. The eighth chapter tells us what happens after the wall was built.

*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. 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. 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. Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah,*

*Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. 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. 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. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maseiah, Kelita, Asariah, Josabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give sense so that they understood the reading.*

*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. 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."*

*So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." 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.*

I want us to unpack these 12 verses because I believe it has many important nuggets for us that we can meditate on. Let us look at different things that can capture our attention.

### **The kind of response that the Israelites had towards the reading of the Law of Moses.**

Remember, all they had was the Torah (the Pentateuch), the five books in the bible from Genesis to Deuteronomy, in the form of a scroll.

vs. 2: It was read before men and women and all who could listen with understanding. All who could listen with understanding, not all who would. Would is a choice we have to be there, but could says – If I can, I'm there. All who could were there.

vs. 3: He read it from early morning until midday, again in the presence of men, women and all who could understand. Six or seven hours of standing and listening to the Word of God! The Bible says that they were attentive.

vs. 5: When Ezra opened the book, all the people stood up. They had such reverence for God's Word that they stood up.

vs. 6: Then Ezra blessed the Lord and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen." And they worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. They blessed the Lord, the thanked Him, and they praised Him. Then they bowed down and worshiped in the context of the reading of God's Word.

vs. 7: The Levites explained the law to the people and the people remained in their places. Nobody was moving around – they were all there listening as the Levites explained the law.

vs. 8: The Levites translated the law to give the sense so the people understood the reading.

So, picture this! Here's Ezra standing up and reading the Word out. They didn't have microphones at that time, so he must have been really shouting. Then there were Levites who were walking around, possibly looking for quizzical looks, or somebody saying, "I can't understand that." Then they would go toward them and explain it. The law was being explained by the Levites while it was being read, so that there was a constant sense of what the book was talking about – what God was speaking to them.

vs. 9: The people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites told them not to weep for this day was holy to the Lord.

vs. 10: Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Go and eat and take the food and give it to the people who don't have food in the context of reading the Word.

vs. 12: The people celebrated by eating and sharing portions with others because they understood the word which had been made known to them. So there was a clear understanding of the people of what had been read.

To summarize the way the people responded:

- They were present and they listened
- They were attentive even though it was for over six hours
- They were reverent – stood up at the reading
- They blessed the Lord
- They worshiped Him
- They remained there the whole time
- They understood, grieved and wept

- They celebrated

All of this in context of reading the Word. Now I know that the Word had been forgotten for a long time; in fact, the reason that they were so stricken in their hearts was the restoration almost seemed to be complete. They had sinned. God had allowed them to be taken away by the Babylonians. And then God had brought them back and helped them to rebuild their lives. Now the Word which had warned them of what they were doing, was now making them sad. And they were weeping. But they stood up. Ezra and Nehemiah had said, "Don't weep! This is not a day to mourn or to grieve. This is a day to celebrate." It's a day of celebration.

### **God's response to the engaging of the Word.**

Joy! The joy of the Lord is our strength! That is what they told the people. So the consequence of God being joyful in the reading of the Word, was that strength was given to the people. Isn't that a wonderful thought? When we engage with scripture at a level where we really understand what the Word is saying – there is reverence, there is intention, our hearts are quickened. When all this comes together, it makes God joyful. How wonderful it would be to see God's face when we take His Word, open it and engage with it. God's face is joyful. There is joy in Him. I'm not talking of the inherent joy that is God Himself. God feels joy because God is a person – three persons in one. He feels like us, He grieves, He's sad, He's angry – all these emotions. But he is also joyful. And here's the wonderful thought! When there's joy on God's face because we engage with His Word, the consequence is that His strength comes to us. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

Think about that for a minute and then ask yourself: What are my weaknesses today? Where are the areas that I struggle? What are the challenges that I face in my life? Where do I feel most alone? From where does the sense of hopelessness come? Even as the Spirit of God brings those places to you, ask yourself the question: How engaged are you in the Word?

Look again at the things that they did: they were reverent, they were attentive, they blessed the Lord, they worshiped Him. They remained there the whole time. They didn't need a restroom break or a water break. They just stood and soaked it in. Isn't that how we must be as we engage in God's Word? If we look at just this passage alone, it transports us to a different realm – a realm of experiencing the strength that we need of every situation that we face.

When was the last time when we read the Bible and we blessed God? Consistently, through the psalms we read about blessing God.

Deuteronomy 8:10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you.

Psalm 100:4 Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name.

Psalm 145:10 All Your works shall give thanks to You, O Lord, and Your godly ones shall bless You.

Psalm 103:2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits. Sing to the Lord, bless His name.

When was the last time we read scripture, then stopped and said, "Lord I bless You." What does it mean to bless the Lord, to praise Him, to thank Him, to worship Him? They blessed Him and they worshiped Him. Praise! Praise comes from our lips and we use everything that we can. If you run out of words, look at the psalmists and they will give you words to speak. You can praise the Lord, then you must worship the Lord. Worship is so important. In the context of reading the Word, to be able to stop and say: Lord, I worship You. Do we ever fall on our face before the Lord after reading His Word? It's gotten so sophisticated. Yet, it seems that there's a certain raw reality that must come into our lives as we engage with God. Something needs to happen that transports us from just reading scripture and engaging with it. They blessed Him, and all the people said 'Amen' and then they bowed down and worshiped Him.

Jack Hayford, who wrote the song 'Majesty', wrote in an article of how he had gone to Africa. He was so taken up with the way the Africans would worship – they would dance and snap their fingers and they had a peculiar way of doing it. He took a video and when he came back, he showed it to everybody. It brought smiles to their faces. One day while Jack was reading his bible and singing, he felt the Lord saying, "Dance for me!" And Jack told the Lord, "Lord, I don't dance. You know that I'm not a dancer." And the Lord told him, "You've been imitating the people of Africa who have danced for me." Jack said that he began to weep; then he got to his feet and danced before the Lord. That was one of the most blessed times in his life.

Do we engage in the Word of God? Or do we just grab a Daily Bread, read a passage and walk off? Do we stop and say, "Lord, how You blessed me." Are we thankful? Do we tell Him that? Do we stop and say, "Lord I just want to worship You this time. I want to just sit in Your presence and bask in Your goodness."

## **The response of the people.**

It's three-fold.

- An inward effect of the Word – that we can see. They were attentive, they were responding.
  - An upward angle – and that's towards God. They blessed Him, they worshiped Him.
  - An outward expression – they went and shared all that they had, the food that they had made, with the people who weren't ready.
- I've said this often: the God who we believe is so concerned about people. He cares for people on the streets, people who don't yet know Him. He desperately wants us to touch those lives.
- John Wesley said: "There is no holiness like social holiness." What does he mean? If we say we are holy, then our holiness must touch people, must touch society, must touch community.

So, as we look at God's Word, we've got to be inspired by this chapter. We've got to walk away from here saying, "I will not read the bible the same way that I've been doing till now. I'm going to dig deeper. I'm going to reach out to Him, to engage with Him. Like the woman who was hemorrhaging, she reached out to Him. I need to ask the Lord what is in His Word that it can transform us, allow us to have this kind of response. The beauty of it is that, through this exercise, even without trying, God's strength comes to us. The joy of the Lord is our strength. In the engaging of His word, suddenly we have the strength to meet every situation, every circumstance, every challenge that comes our way because we've engaged with His Word, in a wonderful way.

That's God's heart for us this morning, inviting you to press in, not to be satisfied with just reading a chapter and moving on. You've got to stop and meditate. Think of the three dimensions of the response of the people. Is the inward dimension doing it for me? The upward dimension – am I connecting back to God through His word? And then the outward dimension – how does His Word make me salt and light around?

Maybe the Spirit of God is speaking to you, challenging you this morning, saying: Will you draw closer to God through His Word? Maybe you feel you don't know how to do it. If you want help, send me an email and I would be willing to sit with you and show you how to do a bible study. We have a format that I use – 8-10 points on how to do a bible study. Send me an email and I will share it with you. If there are enough people who want to do a bible study, then we can do it together. That's my commitment to you. Let's not say I don't know how to do it. Instead I'm not going to do it like I've been doing it. I'm going to press in. I'm going to enjoy the strength and counsel of Your joy as I engage with Your Word. Amen.