

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. David Anderson

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## **Lessons from Nehemiah: A Man of the Book: Nehemiah 8:1-13:31**

Hello! Today's talk is the last in our series "Lessons from Nehemiah", and looks at the last six chapters, chapters 8-13. It is entitled "A man of the Book" because the re-institution of the Law of Moses is the main theme of this part of Nehemiah, which completes the story of the return of the remnant of God's people, Israel, from captivity in Babylon, back to their own land.

It is important to notice that this was always Nehemiah's intention. In his first recorded prayer, 1:5-11, this desire for the Law of God is emphasised. Nehemiah realised that the captivity had happened because the nation of Israel had departed from these ordinances. He re-states in 1:8 what God had said to them through Moses in Leviticus 26:33, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations." However, he had the faith to see that the promises of God included a way back for them, so he continues his prayer in verse 9 to claim these from another part of the Law of Moses, Deuteronomy 30:2-5, "but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather you from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name." This became the basis of all his subsequent prayers, actions and struggles for the city of Jerusalem and its temple, the house of God.

For Christians today, it is vital to see that being "a man (or woman) of the book" involves the correct understanding, interpretation, and application of Scripture that Nehemiah exhibited. As Paul instructs Timothy: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). In looking at this last part of the story of Nehemiah's service for God, we shall repeatedly face the challenge to be similarly devoted to God and devoted to His word.

Nehemiah 7:73 shows the settled state of affairs arising from the work of Nehemiah in fortifying the city of Jerusalem, "all Israel dwelt in their cities." Nehemiah appreciates that now is the time for the re-establishment of the authority of the Law for these people, free from the influences of Babylon, and again in the land which God provided for them so that they could serve Him. He took his opportunity in the seventh month of their year, at the Feast of Tabernacles, having first registered the people. This feast was the last in their religious year and was designed to complete the cycle of worship of the LORD, (see Leviticus 23). Nehemiah acted on the directions of Moses in Deuteronomy 31: 10-13: "At the end of seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross Jordan to possess." It is remarkable this was a repeat, of the situation ninety years previous, when the first home comers gathered together, as Ezra 3:1 records. Then the offerings were re-instituted. Nehemiah 8:1 states that all of the people acted together and met in the large square in front of the Water Gate, men, women, and children to hear the word of God. Ezra is requested "to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel." Some twelve years beforehand, it had been stated about this scribe: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). This scribe is recognised, then, not only in his official position as priest, but also as possessing the necessary personal qualities to bring this word to the people at this crucial point in their history. These are qualities which all Bible teachers should endeavour to have. Personal preparation to know and learn the Book has to be followed by the demonstration of its effect upon one's own life, so that (sometime later) it can be taught to others.

Ezra used a wooden pulpit for this public Bible reading so that he could be both seen and heard. (In this twenty first century there may be audio and visual techniques available to preachers, but the objective remains the same). Others joined him on the platform to support and to assist him in this important task. The people responded immediately when he opened the Book: they stood up, an indication of their reverence for God. "And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground" (8:6). After this act of worship, everyone remained standing for about six hours! The other priests and Levites assisted Ezra. They "helped the people to understand the Law ... So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading" (8:7-8). A Bible teacher should do likewise. These requirements are repeated by Paul in 1

Corinthians 14 for public speaking in church meetings: “giving a distinct sound” by using “words easy to understand” so that “edification” results.

There is an immediate effect upon the people - they weep. This genuine repentance is accepted by Nehemiah, the governor, who gives them a special blessing: “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:9-10). This true joy from the Lord gives them more desire for the word of God, and enables them to be more obedient to it.

On the second day of the month, Ezra continues his duties, and addresses the heads of the fathers’ houses, together with the priests and Levites. He supplies more instructions concerning the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. “They found written in the Law” information which they acted on: “So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths” (8:17). They had very great gladness, an outcome of full obedience to God’s word. Their response produced an unique feast, which had not been known amongst them since Joshua’s time, and it became a highlight of Israel’s history of response in worship to the LORD their God. (Only two other such occurrences are recorded in the Scripture. One was when Hezekiah kept the Passover in 2 Chronicles 30:26: “So there was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel, there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem”. The second was in 2 Kings 23:22-23: when “... [Josiah] commanded all the people, saying, “Keep the Passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in the Book of the Covenant.” Such a Passover surely had never been held since the days of the judges who judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah.”)

Ezra continued to read from the Book of the Law each day of the month, and this led on to the humbling and correction of the people later in the month when the feast had ended. They fasted, sanctified themselves, confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. A proper balance of religious life was maintained. “And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshipped the LORD their God” (9:3). The Levites led the people in a seven-fold ascription of praise to God: the Creator; their Redeemer; the Sovereign One who chose Abram; the Faithful One; the One who had displayed grace and power to their forefathers (9:5-15). They review in prayer their national history with God: in the wilderness (9:16-21); in the land (9:22-27); and finally in captivity (9:28-31).

Failure is admitted - that of constant disobedience to the Law. Cast upon the mercy of God, they recognise the weakness of their current position: “Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, to eat its fruit and its bounty, here we are, servants in it! And it yields much increase to the kings You have set over us, because of our sins; also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle at their pleasure; and we are in great distress” (9:36-37). Determined to avoid further disobedience, they enter into a covenant. 10:1-27 records that first Nehemiah, then twenty-two priests, seventeen Levites and twenty-four chiefs sign this covenant, binding themselves by a curse and oath “to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes” (10:29). The four major elements of this covenant are described in 10:29-39:

1. each one of them would personally walk in obedience to the Law given by Moses (10:29)
2. they would maintain a holy separation from the surrounding nations (10:30)
3. the Sabbath, the holy days, and the law of the seventh year would all be strictly observed, thus giving God His due reverence (10:31)
4. they would re-institute the annual third-of-a-shekel tax for the upkeep of the temple; and accompanying this would be the supply of the many materials for the maintenance of its services and personnel. “We will not neglect the house of our God” they pledged. (10:32-39).

As we apply this part of the story to the present Christian era, we can state that God will also honour any commitment believers make to the truths of the New Testament by a “back-to-the-Bible” attitude. Like those in Nehemiah’s day, there is always a need to find out issues by careful reference to “The Book”.

The next question for Nehemiah to resolve from the Book was not how, but where the people were to live. Even though they were only a small fraction of the nation as a whole, he again reverted to the Law as it was originally given: “...everyone in his inheritance” (11:20) was the principle for action. The people were therefore distributed between the city of Jerusalem and the provinces. The first half of chapter 11 explains Jerusalem was populated with a certain number of Judah (11:4-6) and of Benjamin (11:7-9); a considerable number of priests (11:10-14); some Levites (11:15-18, 22-23); and the gatekeepers (11:19). A similar distribution of these tribes to the provinces is mentioned in the latter half of chapter 11. It was God’s will for them to possess as much of the land as possible. Today, He has His people throughout all of the world, as witnesses to Christ through the Gospel.

In chapter 12 Nehemiah identifies by name everyone who was directly employed in the service of the house of God. All of this service was carried out in accordance with the word of God, as ordained by King David: “...the heads of the

Levites...with their brothers across from them, to praise and give thanks, group alternating with group, according to the command of David the man of God" (12:24). Next in chapter 12, Nehemiah dedicates the walls of Jerusalem. First of all the Levites and the singers were sought out of the provinces. Having purified themselves according to the Law, they ceremonially cleansed the people, the walls, and the gates in readiness for the celebrations (12:27-30). Nehemiah organised two processions to march in opposite directions and then to meet in the house of God. (12:27-42). This showed that he had understood from Psalm 48 the requirements to announce what God had done. "Walk about Zion, and go all around her. Count her towers; mark well her bulwarks; consider her palaces; that you may tell it to the generation following. For this is God, our God forever and ever; He will be our guide even to death.... We have thought, O God, on Your loving kindness, in the midst of Your temple." (Psalm 48:12-14, 9). It was a wonderful day of celebrations: "Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced for God made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off" (12:43). But again the requirements of the word of God were paramount in the heart of Nehemiah and so he took the opportunity to appoint overseers of the storerooms to ensure that the portions "specified by the Law" were provided for the priests and the Levites (12:44 and 47). The services also were established: "Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God." (12:45-46).

Chapter 12 ends with an interesting fact about the whole post-captivity period, from Zerubbabel to Nehemiah: "In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron" (12:47). The whole period was one which was marked, in general, by an increasing obedience to the Law.

There is further reading of the word of God on the day of dedication of the walls in chapter 13. "On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people," and found out about the prohibition on inter-marrying with other races. Action was then taken to purify themselves from those of mixed race (13:1-3). It appears that this was not a new problem but one that had also occurred before this dedication day, during a period when Nehemiah was absent from Jerusalem, having returned to Babylon. Eliashib, the priest in charge of the storerooms, gave one of the rooms in the courts of the house of God to his friend, Tobiah the Ammonite. But he was an enemy of the people who had actively opposed the re-building work (see chapter 6). This serious corruption of power was severely dealt with by Nehemiah when he came back to Jerusalem. Not only did he evict this enemy, but he organised the cleansing of these rooms and their restoration to consecrated duty (13:4-9).

The recollection and recording of this event causes Nehemiah now to catalogue other violations of the Law, which he discovered upon his return from Babylon. As well as the desecration of the house of God, the contributions for the Levites had stopped, and they had gone back to farming their land. The leaders and the people had to be confronted with the issue and these contributions revived. Then he sought out treasurers who "were considered faithful" to oversee and maintain this supply activity (13:10-13).

Next Nehemiah found that work and trading was being carried out on the Sabbath days. Again drastic action was necessary and preventative measures were introduced to maintain the sanctity of these rest days - Levites were placed on gate guarding duties (13:15-23).

Finally Nehemiah records that he found another serious problem of inter-marrying - and that children of these marriages could not even speak the Hebrew language. Worst of all, one of the sons of Eliashib the high priest had married the daughter of Sanballat, a cohort of Tobiah, and also an opponent of the restoration work. In dealing with this problem, Nehemiah refers again to the word of God, and the transgressions of Solomon on this very issue, he was "caused ...to sin" by those he married. This time Nehemiah took personal action, cleansing the priesthood, and re-assigning their duties, each to his service so that everything was brought back to be in accordance with the Book of the Law (13:23-31).

At the end of each incident in chapter 13, Nehemiah offers a short prayer to his God - "Remember me, O my God" - and pleads his faithfulness to the Law. His actions were not executed in an austere way, but with tender feelings for the honour and glory of his God. His final prayer, and the abrupt ending of the book, is: "Remember me, O my God, for good!"

Let us end today's talk by realising that Nehemiah's "back to the Bible" campaign brought to a climax a wonderful revival in Israel. Ezra records that it started in about 538 BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest. About 50,000 people came from captivity in Babylon to set up the altar and to lay the foundations of the house of God (Ezra 1-3). Seventeen years later, as a result of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, it continued when the building work on the temple was both started and completed (Ezra 4-5). A third stage was reached in 458 BC when Ezra led another group of Israelites from Babylon to Jerusalem and the laws

concerning God's house were re-established (Ezra 7-10). It advanced further with the re-building of the walls of Jerusalem, and the setting up of its gates, by Nehemiah fourteen years after Ezra. All of these stages combined to provide the right conditions for this climax: the final revival of the people to practise God's will as described to them in the Law of Moses. God powerfully used Nehemiah, "a man of the Book", to re-assert the authority of His word with amazing effect - these people committed themselves to it by covenant, and lived according to its commandments!

Nehemiah lived in difficult circumstances, with much weakness amongst God's people, and there were many discouragements, as well as opponents. However, God was able to use this one man to cause a revival in true worship and godly living. God is still able today raise up His servants to teach His people know, and to prove, His will. Let it be our determination to follow the example of Nehemiah, Ezra and others: to learn the word of God; to live by its direction; then to instruct others to obey it. Our task is different from theirs, and it is "to preach Christ, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus (Colossians 1:27-29). May our prayer be to stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. Amen.

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