

**Text: Nehemiah 8-10**

The Reading of the Book of the Law

*1And 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. 2Then 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. 3He 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. 4Ezra 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. 5Ezra 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. 6Then 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. 7Also 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. 8They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8:1-8)*

Notice two things here: first, the importance placed upon the reading of the Word by these individuals, and second, the reverence they had for the Word (v. 5). We would do well to approach the Word of God with like reverence.

Why was it so important that they gather together to hear the Word read and taught? Besides the inherent merits of hearing, reading, and knowing the Word, these people were aware that the unfortunate recent history of the Jews was due to their failure to obey the words of the Law. They wanted to be careful to observe them themselves and ensure that their children did so as well (though the clearly fell and would fall from time to time), lest they suffer the same fate.

**18" You shall therefore impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. 19" You shall teach them to your sons, talking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up. 20" You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, 21so that your days and the days of your sons may be multiplied on the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens remain above the earth.**

**26" See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I am commanding you today; 28and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known. (Deuteronomy 11:18-21,26-28)**

Although the Jews were probably not thinking in these terms themselves, we also see in this chapter an example that we should follow in our corporate worship. These days we have so many books, programs, quarterlies, etc. that often we neglect what should be one of the most important elements of our public worship, which is the corporate reading of God's Word. While much of the material that has been produced in the way of sermons, studies, etc. is of high quality, the fact still remains that God uses His Word Itself to bring people to faith in Christ, and to strengthen the faith of believers.

**17So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)**

The People's Reaction

*9Then 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. 10Then 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." 11So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." 12All 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. (Nehemiah 8:9-12)*

The people can justly be commended for their response to Ezra's reading. God's Word quickly brings an awareness of our inadequacy before Him, the only just response being remorse for our sins and contrition before God.

**12For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)**

In spite of this, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites admonished the people to leave their mourning for another time. The day of this reading was a holy day of feasting, and it was not proper to have such a sad disposition on that day. Moreover, the Law, the disobedience of which the people had been mourning, commanded feasting and celebration, and therefore their responsibility was to joyfully acknowledge and celebrate God's goodness. This is reminiscent of a principle taught in Ecclesiastes:

**1There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven--**

**2A time to give birth and a time to die;**

**A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.**

**3A time to kill and a time to heal;**

**A time to tear down and a time to build up.**

**4A time to weep and a time to laugh;**

**A time to mourn and a time to dance.**

**5A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;**

**A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.**

**6A time to search and a time to give up as lost;**

**A time to keep and a time to throw away.**

**7A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;**

**A time to be silent and a time to speak.**

**8A time to love and a time to hate;**

**A time for war and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)**

#### A First Act of Obedience

*13Then 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. 14They 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. 15So 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." 16So 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. 17The 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. 18He 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. (Nehemiah 8:13-18)*

Again, the people had heard the Law read, understood Its commands, and were determined to obey. The celebration of the Feast of Booths (or Feast of Tabernacles) was mandated, therefore they did so.

**34"Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'On the fifteenth of this seventh month is the Feast of Booths for seven days to the LORD. 35'On the first day is a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work of any kind.**

**36'For seven days you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation and present an offering by fire to the LORD; it is an assembly. You shall do no laborious work.**

**37'These are the appointed times of the LORD which you shall proclaim as holy convocations, to present offerings by fire to the LORD--burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each day's matter on its own day-- 38besides those of the sabbaths of the LORD, and besides your gifts and besides all your votive and freewill offerings, which you give to the LORD. 39'On exactly the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the crops of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD for seven days, with a rest on the first day and a rest on the eighth day. 40'Now on the first day you shall take for yourselves the foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. 41'You shall thus celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. 42'You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths, 43so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I**

**brought them out from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.''' 44So Moses declared to the sons of Israel the appointed times of the LORD. (Leviticus 23:34-44)**

We see that the feast was not properly celebrated for hundreds of years prior to this event. Again, the people were aware of their shortcomings and those of their ancestors, and were determined not to bring the same curse upon themselves.

**26'Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' (Deuteronomy 27:26)**

### The People Confess

*1Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. 2The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. 4Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. 5Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said,*

*"Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever!*

*O may Your glorious name be blessed  
And exalted above all blessing and praise!*

*6" You alone are the LORD*

*You have made the heavens,  
The heaven of heavens with all their host,  
The earth and all that is on it,  
The seas and all that is in them  
You give life to all of them  
And the heavenly host bows down before You.*

*7" You are the LORD God,*

*Who chose Abram  
And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees,  
And gave him the name Abraham.*

*8" You found his heart faithful before You,*

*And made a covenant with him  
To give him the land of the Canaanite,  
Of the Hittite and the Amorite,  
Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite--  
To give it to his descendants  
And You have fulfilled Your promise,  
For You are righteous.*

*9" You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,*

*And heard their cry by the Red Sea.*

*10" Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh,*

*Against all his servants and all the people of his land;  
For You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them,  
And made a name for Yourself as it is this day.*

*11" You divided the sea before them,*

*So they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground;  
And their pursuers You hurled into the depths,  
Like a stone into raging waters.*

*12" And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day,*

*And with a pillar of fire by night  
To light for them the way  
In which they were to go.*

*13" Then You came down on Mount Sinai,*

*And spoke with them from heaven;  
You gave them just ordinances and true laws,  
Good statutes and commandments.*

*14" So You made known to them Your holy sabbath,*

*And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law,*

- Through Your servant Moses.*
- 15"You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger,  
You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst,  
And You told them to enter in order to possess  
The land which You swore to give them.
- 16"But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly;  
They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments.
- 17"They refused to listen,  
And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them;  
So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt  
But You are a God of forgiveness,  
Gracious and compassionate,  
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness;  
And You did not forsake them.
- 18"Even when they made for themselves  
A calf of molten metal  
And said, 'This is your God  
Who brought you up from Egypt,'  
And committed great blasphemies,
- 19You, in Your great compassion,  
Did not forsake them in the wilderness;  
The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day,  
To guide them on their way,  
Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they were to go.
- 20"You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them,  
Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth,  
And You gave them water for their thirst.
- 21"Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness and they were not in want;  
Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.
- 22"You also gave them kingdoms and peoples,  
And allotted them to them as a boundary.  
They took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon  
And the land of Og the king of Bashan.
- 23"You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven,  
And You brought them into the land  
Which You had told their fathers to enter and possess.
- 24"So their sons entered and possessed the land  
And You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites,  
And You gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land,  
To do with them as they desired.
- 25"They captured fortified cities and a fertile land  
They took possession of houses full of every good thing,  
Hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves,  
Fruit trees in abundance  
So they ate, were filled and grew fat,  
And reveled in Your great goodness.
- 26"But they became disobedient and rebelled against You,  
And cast Your law behind their backs  
And killed Your prophets who had admonished them  
So that they might return to You,  
And they committed great blasphemies.
- 27"Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them,  
But when they cried to You in the time of their distress,  
You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion  
You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors.
- 28"But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You;  
Therefore You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them  
When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven,  
And many times You rescued them according to Your compassion,
- 29And admonished them in order to turn them back to Your law  
Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances,  
By which if a man observes them he shall live

*And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen.*  
30"However, You bore with them for many years,  
*And admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets,  
Yet they would not give ear.  
Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.*  
31"Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them,  
*For You are a gracious and compassionate God.*  
32"Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and  
lovingkindness,  
*Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You,  
Which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people,  
From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.*  
33"However, You are just in all that has come upon us;  
*For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.*  
34"For our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers have not kept Your law  
*Or paid attention to Your commandments and Your admonitions with which You have admonished them.*  
35"But they, in their own kingdom,  
*With Your great goodness which You gave them,  
With the broad and rich land which You set before them,  
Did not serve You or turn from their evil deeds.*  
36"Behold, we are slaves today,  
*And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty,  
Behold, we are slaves in it.*  
37"Its abundant produce is for the kings  
*Whom You have set over us because of our sins;  
They also rule over our bodies  
And over our cattle as they please,  
So we are in great distress. (Nehemiah 9:1-37)*

This is a very long, involved, and fervent prayer! Besides providing a basic synopsis of Old Testament history, this prayer closely follows the model presented by Christ years later.

**9"Pray, then, in this way:**

**'Our Father who is in heaven,  
Hallowed be Your name.**

**10>Your kingdom come**

**Your will be done,**

**On earth as it is in heaven.**

**11'Give us this day our daily bread.**

**12'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

**13'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power  
and the glory forever. Amen.]' (Matthew 6:9-13)**

Much of the prayer in Nehemiah is invested in praise ("hallowed be Your name") and confession of sin ("forgive us our debts"). Still, we see the other elements present. They acknowledge the supremacy of God's Will (v. 33), and the necessity of God's provision and deliverance is implicit in the last part of the prayer, as they relate their current distresses in such a way that says "please help!"

Commitment

38"Now because of all this

*We are making an agreement in writing;*

*And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests."*

*1Now on the sealed document were the names of: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah,  
2Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, 3Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, 4Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, 5Harim, Meremoth,  
Obadiah, 6Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, 7Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, 8Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah. These were  
the priests. 9And the Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; 10also their  
brothers Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, 11Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, 12Zaccur, Sherebiah,  
Shebaniah, 13Hodiah, Bani, Beninu. 14The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani,  
15Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, 16Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, 17Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, 18Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai,  
19Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, 20Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, 21Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, 22Pelatiah, Hanan,*

*Anaiah, 23Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, 24Hollohesh, Pilha, Shobek, 25Rehum, ashabnah, Maaseiah, 26Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, 27Malluch, Harim, Baanah. (Nehemiah 9:38-10:27)*

There is something about signing a document that says “upon my honor, I commit to this.” Much like the signers of the U.S. Constitution, by signing this document the leaders of the Jews staked their lives and livelihoods upon the fulfillment of this covenant. Such a firm commitment to serve God in Jerusalem brought a certain level of temporal risk, since the neighboring peoples were very hostile to the Jews’ presence, as you’ve read previously. More importantly, they were making a promise before the Lord saying that they and their ancestors had sinned, and that they would do differently. We have already seen that God promised a curse among those that did not obey Him—how much more so for those that bind themselves with an extra promise!

Ultimately, though, the action of these people was not unlike the action that brings about salvation. As these people sought God’s blessing under the Old Covenant, so those of us under the New Covenant must not only believe in God, but acknowledge the Lordship of—and therefore our subservience to—Christ.

**9that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Romans 10:9-10)**

Christ also admonished us to “count the cost,” as these people did. They realized that committing to the Lord, His People, His Temple, and His Land, brought with it certain risks. Nevertheless, they considered the service of God to abrogate, if necessary, all other responsibilities. Likewise, if we are to truly be Christ’s servants, our commitment to His Lordship must be the paramount commitment in our lives, superseding all others if necessary. The Christian who falls away in times of difficulty is no Christian at all.

**25Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, 26'If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. 27'Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. 28'For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? 29'Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, 30saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31'Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32'Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33'So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions. 34'Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned? 35'It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.' (Luke 14:25-35)**

### Renewal and Expansion of the Covenant

*28Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, 29are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes; 30and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. 31As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego the crops the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. 32We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: 33for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God. 34Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law; 35and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually, 36and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God. 37We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns. 38The priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. 39For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the*

*utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers and the singers Thus we will not neglect the house of our God. (Nehemiah 10:28-39)*

This passage really constitutes a renewal of the Old Covenant, rather than anything new (the only addition is a specific tax for the maintenance of Temple worship). While they were already bound by these commandments, the people saw value in rededicating themselves to God's service. Likewise, while there is nothing that a Christian can do to make himself "more saved," there is still value in periodically renewing our commitment to Christ's Lordship.

A few items of specific importance here as related to modern Christians: first, the promise to not become intertwined by marriage with the heathen peoples of the land. For the New Testament believer, the command to not be "unequally yoked" with nonbelievers, whether through marriage or some other oath, still stands. While we are certainly not required to abstain from all contact with nonbelievers (how then would we witness to them?), we are to avoid bonding together with them in relationships of particular familiarity or import.

**14Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)**

Second, the admonition to give. There are differing opinions on whether the New Testament believer is specifically obligated to *tithe*, or give ten percent of his income to the Lord in a specific, legalistic manner. However, there is no debate that, as the Lord prospers us, we are commanded to give. In most circumstances, at least in America, we can easily give ten percent or more to the Lord's work, and should do so readily, willingly, and happily.

**17"Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you. (Deuteronomy 16:17)**

**7Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)**

Finally, the support of ministers. We are commanded to support those that minister unto us so that they can devote themselves fully to God's work, without being preoccupied with concern for their abilities to provide for themselves or their families. While exorbitant salaries are certainly not called for, our ministers should receive a comfortable, median income that allows them to devote their time to God's service and the ministry of the Word without concern for his daily bread.

**17The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. 18For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." (1 Timothy 5:17-18)**