

# God Revives His People Through a Scribe

**SESSION IN A SENTENCE:** God's Word brings an awareness of sin and prompts repentance.

**BACKGROUND PASSAGE:** Nehemiah 8–13

My past history as a preteen and my present life as a father have taught me that the art of spot cleaning is passed on from parent to child. Every time I catch my kids cleaning only the front of their rooms in hope that I walk by and settle for a cursory glance, I smile slyly, and I think about how I mastered that art through the years. After whispering, “Rookie,” under my breath, I enter the room and explain that though play time with toys and the trampoline is calling, they still have work to complete.

Similarly for the people of God during the time of Nehemiah, though the walls were now rebuilt, their work was not complete. God was after complete restoration, socially and spiritually. Nehemiah and Ezra knew this. It wouldn't be enough for the walls of the city to be rebuilt if the hearts of the people were still broken.



Why are we prone to settle for incomplete work instead of a job well done?

# Group Time

## Point 1: God's people gather to hear God's word (Neh. 7:73b–8:6).

<sup>7:73b</sup> And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns. <sup>8:1</sup> And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. <sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup> And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. <sup>4</sup> And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. <sup>5</sup> And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. <sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Thousands of people gathered together in one place from morning until midday for one purpose—to refresh their hearts with the word of God. At their request, Ezra the priest read aloud the Book of the Law, which revealed God's identity, work, and expectations.



What are some ways we complicate the simple proclamation and teaching of God's Word?

Errands were put on hold, hobbies suspended, and to-do lists went undone because God's attributes and activities were being proclaimed aloud. The people's commitment to hear and the content they heard declared a simple reality: God's Word is worthy of proclamation.

**Preservation of Scripture:** God has chosen to reveal Himself to \_\_\_\_\_ through the text of Scripture. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully \_\_\_\_\_ for future generations.

## Point 2: God's people confess sin as they proclaim God's glory (Neh. 9:1-5).

<sup>1</sup> Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. <sup>2</sup> And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. <sup>3</sup> And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God. <sup>4</sup> On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani; and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. <sup>5</sup> Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Stand up and bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

On this day of gathering as the people of God, confession of sin was a primary focus. Having heard the law of Moses read for a week straight (8:18), the people felt the weight of their guilt and shame. So they confessed their sin, both *individually* and *corporately*. As a people, they bore the consequences of their forefathers' sins in the reality of their exile and oppression, so they felt it necessary to identify with their fathers and confessed their fathers' sins along with their own (9:2).

**Guilt and Shame:** Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an \_\_\_\_\_ sense and also feel the weight of shame in a \_\_\_\_\_ sense.

God's work of restoring the people's hearts continued with reestablishing rhythms of confession and worship in the life of His people. From the Sabbath to honoring and adhering to holy days (8:13-18), the people were on a pathway to intimacy with God and each other, which involved the profound act of **confession** culminating in **praise**.



What is the connection between confession of sin and praise for God?



### Voices from Church History

"You never go away from us. Yet we have diligently in returning to you. Come Lord, stir us up and call us back, kindle and seize us, be our fire and our sweetness. Let us love, let us run."<sup>1</sup>

—Augustine (354-430)

### Point 3: God's people commit to obey God's law (Neh. 10:28-29).

<sup>28</sup> “The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, <sup>29</sup> join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes.

The people highlighted in this passage were following the lead of their governor, Nehemiah, and their other national and spiritual leaders (9:38–10:27). This communal commitment reflected a diverse group of people united in heart for **accountability**. The goal of their commitment was obedience to the law of God for the glory of God and for their preservation as a people, as a family of God.



Why are people prone to shun accountability in their relationships within the family of God?

Every command God gives is good. Every restriction God gives is good. The lies of the enemy that resonate the most in our sinful hearts are the ones that suggest God is withholding something good from us, that He doesn't care (see Gen. 3:4-6). Obedience, therefore, is an act of **faith** in the good character and heart of God, even when times are difficult. In other words, obedience is a statement of **love** that indicates our relationship with God is of more value than whatever we want to do at any given moment.



How have you experienced obedience being an act of faith and love for God?



# Daily Study

## Day 1: Read Nehemiah 8

The Scriptures are always after the heart; they are directed beneath the surface of the hearer to the seat of the soul. This is why, as you read or hear the Scriptures, you interact with them differently based on the state of your heart. If your heart is dull or hard to the things of God, then the words of God may not affect you. But if your heart is soft and ignited by the Spirit of God, then the words of God often come alive in your heart in unimaginable and powerful ways.

The Israelites who had returned from exile were eager to avoid yet another exile for their disobedience, so they turned their hearts to the Word of God to know what God expected of them. The posture in which they requested, received, and responded to the reading of God's Word revealed the inner workings of their hearts.

The Law of Moses was read and teachers took the time to explain it to the people so they could understand its meaning and intent. No doubt this brought conviction in their hearts for their sins, but it also led to joy as the people, probably for the first time in a long time, heard God's commands and chose to obey them. Their faith in the Lord was deepened through personal, intentional, and thoughtful interaction with the Scriptures, followed by joyful obedience. Their posture and practice are a pathway to be considered and followed as we read and hear God's Word.



What rhythms do you have in your life for personal, intentional, and thoughtful interaction with the Scriptures, followed by joyful obedience?

## Day 2: Read Nehemiah 9

The Israelites had been told not to weep or grieve at the initial hearing of God's law (8:9-12). But there was a time to weep for their sins. God had given them commands to obey, and the people's disobedience had wrecked them over and over and over again, and the consequences for their sin were still being felt.

Yet they came to God in prayer and praise with hope because of who He is. Their song of blessing proclaimed the Lord as the Creator, the covenant-maker and keeper, and their deliverer. Their song also confessed with honesty how the people had failed to honor the Lord in obedience. But this highlighted yet another reason to praise the Lord—He is gracious in His forgiveness and faithful in His patience.

This prayer of praise summarizes the storyline of the Old Testament, and this story is the story of God and His work in the world. The truth of these Scriptures grounded their requests and their steps going forward.



How does Scripture ground your requests and your next steps of faithful obedience?

## Day 3: Read Nehemiah 10

The revival of the people resulted in a commitment to obedience. It is incumbent on us to see that their commitment to obey wasn't just affirmation of duty but an expression of delight—an expression of their renewed faith in their Creator and Savior God (9:5-37).

Whenever we commit to obey God, it should be for the same reasons—duty *and* delight. We find ourselves in a dangerous space when we reduce obedience to duty (“I only obey because I must”) or delight (“I only obey when I want to”). Obedience for the Christian must be both, an outworking of our faith in Christ and an expression of our love for God.

To desire, delight in, cherish, and value God is to obey Him. Our obedience to His commands is evidence of our relationship with Him as our Father, and that relationship is grounded in faith (1 John 5:1-4). Only by faith in the one true God and His Son sent for our salvation can we obey the Lord from duty *and* delight.




What are some reasons you resist obedience to God, and how can you grow in your faith to obey from duty and delight?

## Day 4: Read Nehemiah 11–12

Even though the wall around Jerusalem had been rebuilt, the city was still sparsely populated (7:4). The pride and joy of Judah, the city for the Lord's dwelling in the temple, remained impoverished. The people did not want to live there, and given the incredible opposition from enemies while the walls were being built, who could blame them? Yet God had promised a restoration of His people and His promised land, and that required people living in the capital city.


The bulk of chapters 11–12 is a listing of names and numbers of people who were called out by the casting of lots to pick up from their hometowns and move into Jerusalem. This is monotonous, but these verses testify to the faithfulness of God and the privilege of obedience. The Lord populated His city, and the people who came were recorded in Scripture and blessed by their countrymen.

 How are you being called to obey in ways you may not want to?

## Day 5: Read Nehemiah 13

The people in the promised land had committed themselves to obedience to the Lord's commands and signed their names to this promise (Neh. 9–10). But that didn't stop some of the people from disobeying once again. Chapter 13 contains examples of people dishonoring the temple, the Sabbath, and God's law about marrying idol-worshippers. (Note: Those who rejected their idols were allowed to worship the one true God along with the people of God; see Ruth; Ezra 6:21.)

As Nehemiah called people to account for their willful disobedience, he called on the Lord to remember him for his faithfulness (Neh. 13:14,22,31). If he had wanted to be remembered by the people he governed, he could have enabled their disobedience, approved of it, and even participated in it. But his focus and desire was on the Lord, to be remembered by our faithful and compassionate God. This ought always to be our desire as Christians—not to please human beings but the God whose favor is everlasting (Gal. 1:10).

 How does the gospel of Jesus Christ figure into our favor with God?







## *The Gospel Project*®

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Think about the encouragement people often share to help others through times of adversity. We might hear someone speak of how pressure is required to

transform coal into a diamond; thus, pressure can be good for us, transforming us into someone better. Or we might be told of the hatchling that has to work to break through its eggshell, and that struggle is good for this creature—even necessary—so that it grows strong. Likewise, adversity strengthens us and positions us to be who we were meant to be.

While these illustrations might provide encouragement, they reveal something quite important about the world's view of adversity. The world sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to dig deep, gaze within their soul, and discover who he or she truly is. But the gospel tells a different story—a better story. The gospel sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to look high above, gaze upon Christ, and see who He truly is. For it is Christ, not ourselves, who carries us through all trials and suffering. Adversity positions us to rely on Christ's power, not an inner human strength that has been lying dormant.

In this volume we pick up the story of Scripture with the Jews living in bondage in a foreign land, the result of their rebellion against God. But even in the midst of judgment, God's faithful love still shines forth brightly. We will witness God continuing to guide, strengthen, and protect His people in their time of great adversity, not to help them discover who they were but rather to understand who He is. At the same time, we will see God continue to drive the events of history toward the fulfillment of His ancient promise to provide the Rescuer, the One who would free people from an even greater bondage, that of sin and death.