



## Nehemiah 8:1-18

### Expository Bible Preaching

I miss the writings of Dr. L. Nelson Bell, the medical doctor whose pen was as effective as his scalpel. For 25 years he was the chief surgeon at the Tsingkiangpu General Hospital in China. After being ousted by the Communists in China, he returned to private practice as a surgeon in Asheville, N. C. Dr. Bell told this story:

The operating room was gleaming with the multiplied perfections of modern equipment. Not only was everything spotless, but the cool, conditioned air was constantly subjected to the purifying light rays that reduced even normal bacterial to a minimum.

Two surgeons, along with residents under training, were standing motionless in their pale green sterilized gowns and caps, their faces partially covered by germ-inhibiting masks.

Both the chief surgeon and his first assistant were men whose years of arduous training and experience had earned for them certification in their surgical specialty. They were members of a number of learned societies. The elder of the two had only recently been honored by his associates by being made chief-of-staff of the hospital, and just prior to that he had been the president of a society of distinguished surgeons.

The patient, draped with sterile sheets and towels, was breathing deeply as the anesthetic began to take effect.

Then the anesthetist looked up and nodded his head. The patient was ready.

On the Mayo stands and the tables adjacent to the operating table there was a shining array of instruments, each designed for a specific purpose —elamps, clips, retractors, spreaders, scissors, sutures of various kinds —everything needed to facilitate the operation.

The surgeon finished draping the patient, already thoroughly prepared by scrubbing and the application of antiseptic solutions. Then, looking around, he took up an instrument, but laid it down. Then he took up another, but laid it down too. He went from one to another, handling each of the various instruments.

It was a strange pantomime. The surroundings were perfect, the patient desperately needed surgery, but the entire procedure consisted of meaningless motions. The surgeon made no incision.

He did not use the knife.

Naturally, some in the room were disturbed, others were confused, and some were exasperated.

After an hour, the patient was rolled from the operating to the recovery room. There he was cared for until fully recovered from the anesthetic. Then he was taken to his room where relatives waited anxiously to see him. Friends sent in flowers and messages, evidences of their love and concern.

Before long it was obvious that the patient was no better. The same old symptoms recurred. There was still pain and weakness. Why was the patient no better?

Hospital authorities were asked to investigate. The surgical staff met and discussed the case and also a number of similar ones that had occurred in the same hospital. Every step in the patients' history was gone over again and again in an honest attempt to uncover the cause of repeated failures to cure these patients.

One night during a general staff meeting, the mystery was again under discussion. The interns and residents were encouraged to share in the discussion. One young man, not considered as bright or promising as some of the others, ventured to speak up:

Mr. Chief-of-Staff, he said, I've scrubbed in on a number of these unsuccessful operations and there is one thing I have repeatedly noticed; the surgeon does not use the knife. There is no incision, no bleeding, no going down to the source of the illness, nothing is removed; when the patient leaves the operating room, he is in exactly the same condition as when he went in. "

"But, the chief surgeon said, the knife is old; it is full of imperfections; I do not trust the quality of its steel; in fact, I feel that it is more an ornament than an instrument —something suitable to keep on the table, but not necessary or effective in the complicated surgical conditions confronting us today. "

The intern was subdued, but as we left the room we thought we heard him mutter under his breath: "Those poor patients! They are still sick; they leave the hospital just like they came in. Surely something is wrong. Why don't they use the knife?" (L. Nelson Bell, *Convictions to Live By*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966, pp. 127-129).

In our day there is an appalling lack of use of the knife, the sword of the Spirit. We need to get into the Word, explain and teach it with authority because it brings spiritual healing.

"For 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. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:12-13, NASB 1995).

The apostle Paul admonished, "Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. The instrument that brings renewing is always the Word of God.

In Nehemiah chapter eight we have the characteristics of genuine authentic Bible exposition.

Let's keep in mind that the goal of Bible study is to maintain the meaning of the Scripture and make personal application. There are three things to keep in mind as we study the Bible: Observation, Interpretation, and practical Applications.

## **WE NEED ACCURATE OBSERVATION OF THE WORD (8:1-6)**

All good Biblical teaching begins with a hunger for the established truths of God's Word. All of the people spoke to Ezra as one man asking him to bring the book of the Law. This seems to be a spontaneous gathering of the people. They had a hunger, a longing, and a desire for the Scriptures. This is the first appearance of Ezra in the book of Nehemiah.

The Law was the entire Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They stood listening from daybreak until noon. That is how much they wanted to hear a word from God. I pray that Holy Spirit will increase our appetite for God's Word and capacity for more of Him.

Ezra had arrived with a group of exiles from Persia thirteen years earlier to rebuild the Temple and teach the Law of God. This is our first encounter with him in the book of Nehemiah.

The key question in observation is: What does it say? Here we need to concentrate on the text itself. Read it carefully, read repeatedly, read patiently, read prayerfully, read purposefully, and read inquisitively. As you read ask: who, what, where, when, why and how?

The difference between reading and studying is like the difference between drifting in a boat and rowing towards a destination. "

### ***They read the Scriptures silently and out loud (vv. 1-4).***

"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, Anaiyah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand" (Nehemiah 8:1-4, NASB 1995).

It may sound elementary, but pay attention to what you read. Ask yourself who, what, when, where, why,

It may sound elementary, but pay attention to what you read. Ask yourself who, what, when, where, why, and how. The best students are conscious of the words they are reading.

One of my favorite visiting professors in the seminary was Bernard Ramm. He made the following statement in an article in *ETERNITY* magazine.

The good interpreter never looks at a word without a question mark in his mind. He may consult his Greek lexicon, or his Webster's, or a commentary, or a concordance. But he fusses around among his books till the word upon which he has fixed his attention begins to glow with meaning.

An experienced doctor has a wonderful sensitivity in his fingers. He has spent a lifetime feeling lumps, swellings, growths, tumors, and wens.

He knows their textures, their shapes, and their peculiarities. Where our fingers tell us two things, a doctor's fingers might tell him a dozen things. Just as a doctor's fingers have a feel for lumps and growths, so a Bible teacher must have a feel for words. He must pass the fingers of his mind over their shapes, textures, and peculiarities.

This means sensitivity to phrases, clauses, paragraphs, and idioms. A good Bible teacher is restless; he takes nothing for granted. He is the detective whose victim is the meaning and the words in their various combinations of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs are the clues. Out of the various configurations of the words he delves for the meaning. He looks for the train of thought (i.e., the sequence in meaning) and tries to follow it throughout the passage. He works, digs, meditates, ruminates, and studies until the meaning of the biblical text shines through.

It is right at this point where the poor teacher fails. He is content with his efforts even though his thoughts are vague and his impressions are indistinct. As soon as he gets a good exhortation or practical application, he's content and rests at that point. He does not sit with a restless mind and dig and sweat until he has achieved the meaning of the text.

Chuck Swindoll writes, "When you study the Bible, always pay close attention to words. Never miss the significant ones. Pull out your dictionary; trace the meaning of key words. Talk the words through; think the words through. Compare that word with another word and another place in Scripture where a similar word is used so that you will begin to see the meaning of the passage. "

Another excellent expositor, John R. W. Stott refers to the importance of concentrating on words like a dog worrying over a bone." It is not just casual attention, but an intensive preoccupation with the words.

The focus of Nehemiah 8:1ff was upon the Word of God. It is not the performance, the person, opinions, programs, etc.

G. Campbell Morgan's motto was: "Let the Bible tell its own eternal message."

### ***The people had an extraordinary reverence for the Word (v. 5-6).***

"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' (vv. 5-6).

Something wonderful happened: 1) Ezra opened the book. 2) As he opened it, the people all stood up. 3) Ezra praised the LORD, the great God. 4) All the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" 5) Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

In some of the Churches of Scotland they have a ceremony that is probably based on this passage. It begins with an officer, called the Beadle, who marches down the aisle with an open Bible in his hand and the entire congregation stands up. As he places the Bible on the pulpit they respond, "Amen! Amen!"

It is important to observe The Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel (v. 1). The Law was not something that was still in the process of evolving or being written. It was complete and recognized as such by the people of God. They recognized it as God's Word, their complete divine authority. It was recognized as God's Word.

Kaufmann observes: "Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in post-exilic times, the Torah book was still being added to and revised. It is clear, The founders of post-exilic Judaism were not the composers, but merely the collectors of the Torah literature. They did not alter anything of what they found written much less add to it" (*The Religion of Israel*, p. 193).

It is not bibliolatry, but acknowledgment that it is the very Word of God.

They respected the Book. The people rose in respectful silence when Ezra opened the scroll. The people listened attentively to the Scriptures. They responded in a spontaneous, unguarded expression of praise and profound gratitude to God saying, "Amen! Amen!!" Then they fell on their faces and worshipped Him.

### **It is our only source of authority.**

Don't play the Bible against Jesus as if there is a conflict between Him and the Scriptures. You will not find Jesus or the apostle Paul in opposition to a full plenary understanding the authority of the Scriptures. The Bible is the Word of God in written form.

### **They gave it their full concentration.**

Please remember what it is you are reading. It is God's book.

Not only do we need to know what the Scripture says, but we also need to know what it means. Until we know what the text says we are not prepared to determine what it means or how it applies.

Ezra prays preceding his reading of the Law.

### **WE NEED ACCURATE INTERPRETATION OF THE WORD (8:7-8).**

If you miss God's meaning of the passage, then you no longer have God's Word.

How did the original author intend the words to be understood? Each passage of scripture has only one meaning but may have several applications. What does this passage mean? What is the significance of this? Why did God include this? What is the purpose of this passage? How does it fit in to other Scriptures?

### **Get an accurate interpretation.**

## ***Get an accurate interpretation.***

We can't make an accurate interpretation of the Scripture until we know it intimately.

One expositor put it this way: "I often read the passage aloud. I read it repeatedly. I read it with emphasis and feeling. I pause. I think. I take some time to pray over that section. I think it through as best I can until it becomes very familiar in my mind. I read it over and over and over again so that the focus of my concentration is upon Scripture. I become so familiar with it I can 'see' it in my mind without having to look at it all the time" (Swindoll).

G. C. Morgan said he never preached from a passage unless he had read it at least 50 times.

## ***Translate the Scriptures into terms people can understand.***

Something exciting happens in the following verses: ". . . 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 (margin explaining) to give the sense so that they understood the reading" (vv. 7-8).

Here is the Biblical basis for expository preaching. They explained the law making it clear. Remember the explanation did not have the same authority as the Word of God itself. However, we do have to understand it to obey it.

The Hebrew word for "translating" means, "to make something distinct, to separate it from something else so as to make it flow together in a meaningful fashion. It has the idea to take it apart and throw light on it so it will be clear and understandable. They separated the sentences and words so that they fit into place in an intelligible fashion. The truth was explained so all who listened would understand its meaning and be able to apply it to their personal lives.

We are "to give the sense so that they understood the reading" or "insight, to see into something." They shed light on it. They gave the passage in-depth understanding.

Why did the scribes have to do that? It was probably because while the Jews had been in Babylonian captivity for seventy years they had a Babylonian culture, mentality and life-style. They were Jews by birth, but culturally a mixture of Babylonian and Jews. They heard the Hebrew Scriptures through a Babylonian mind-set. They needed a clear explanation to understand it and apply it to their lives. They needed an in-depth, intelligible, clear presentation of the Word of God.

Moreover, we are not through with the Word until we make practical application of it to our personal lives.

## ***WE NEED PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE WORD (8:9-12).***

What was the response of those who heard the Word of God explained? You are wasting your time if you read and study the Scriptures but do not intend to obey it. Studying the Word of God is not the goal, but the means of becoming like Christ in character. If you do not obey the Word of God, you will not grow into spiritual maturity.

## ***The response of the people to the preached word was revival.***

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"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" (v. 9).

Why were the people crying (v. 9)? The Word was applied to their lives. They heard the word and responded to it. The depth of their conviction of sin brought weeping. The day of deep conviction resulted in sadness of heart as they discovered how serious had been their failure in the light of God's Word. The Word of God reveals sin in our lives. Suddenly the people realized how radically depraved they were. They saw how their thoughts, attitudes and behaviors ran contrary to God.

A spirit of conviction is a very wonderful thing when a heart is broken in recognition of its own complete failure. It is a gift from God.

### **Apply the Word of God to where you live.**

Let it speak to your hopes, ambitions, desires, frustrations, joys, personal growth, your sins, and forgiveness. Claim its promises for today. A good place to begin is with the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:20-22.

### **The Word when applied brings healing (vv. 9-11).**

"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" (vv. 9-11).

We don't want to stop at the place of weeping and mourning over our sins. That is important, but with that mourning comes rejoicing in a fresh sense of forgiveness. The Holy Spirit will never comfort you until you mourn. However, when you mourn over your sins, the joy of the LORD is your strength. "

If you minister the Word of God and you see the grace of God working in people's lives, confessing sin, and repenting, move them on to the joy of the Lord. Do not go on manipulating guilt. The devil can use even that to his own ends. Only by leaning on the Lord can we overcome evil consistently. God is forgiving. Move on to rejoicing in His grace and spiritual growth in His Word. It is time to go eat of the fat, drink of the sweet and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for their day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength (v. 10). Have you experienced that joy? Have you experienced that strength?

The joy and strength of the Lord is independent of any and all circumstances. No experience in life can ever touch the believer except by permission of the Lord. Whatever God permits to touch our lives, we may be sure He will bestow the strength to see us through.

The true convictions of the Holy Spirit is intended to bring us to the end of our own strength that we might discover infinite resources in Christ and rejoice in Him. It causes us to give all glory to God. Such joy is based upon forgiveness, and the only explanation for the forgiveness of God is found in the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus for our sins. It is the gift of God's grace. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). All of our sins have been cast into the depths of the sea, behind His back, as far as the east is from the west, into the deep forgetfulness of God.

"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 (v. 12).

### ***The Word must be obeyed.***

The people returned the second day to hear the Word of God explained so they might gain insight into the words of the law. The Hebrew word for insight means, to be prudent, or wise. The person who gains insight from the Word of God becomes wise and has foresight. He gains discernment and keen awareness into life. It takes time to gain insight. It takes a teachable attitude and time to meditate on the Word of God.

### ***Revival in Judah***

"Then 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. They 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. So 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. So 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. The 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. He 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" (vv. 13-18).

This is a description of the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. It was one of Israel's three main feasts (Lev. 23:40). It reminded the people of God's care and provision during the wilderness wanderings (Psa. 27:32-43). When the people got into God's Word they realized they had forsaken vital truths. God told them to live in booths made of branches for a week. It was a reminder of God's grace and mercy in delivering His chosen people during their wilderness experience. The entire assembly of Israel made booths and lived in them (v. 17).

It was a reminder to God's people that this is not our permanent home. Our journey is that of a pilgrim. C. S. Lewis said, "Our kind heavenly Father has provided many wonderful inns for us along our journey, but He takes special care to see that we never mistake any of them for home."

When people obey God's Word there is great rejoicing. Happiness is when God's people obey Him. Happiness is the result of righteousness, not circumstances.

Every genuine revival in church history has been when God's Word has been proclaimed, and as a result, God ignites the fire of His Word and revives His people to go and win the lost. The major focus of any revival is the proclamation of the Bible. God uses His Word to reveal the ruin and despair of depravity of man and the wonders of His grace to save.

## **ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

1. Accept the authority of the Scriptures over your life. You cannot have great character unless it is firmly established upon God's Word. Learn to submit to its authority daily. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will

established upon God's Word. Learn to submit to its authority daily. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). The apostle John who loved Jesus said, "And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:3-6).

2. No life is complete without an accurate understanding of God's Word. Our spiritual lives are dependent on the food God gives through the Bible. Set a time to get into the Scriptures each day.

3. There is no spiritual growth without obedience to the revealed Word of God. Hearing the truth is not enough; we must obey the truth we learn. We must act on these truths to truly learn them.

4. Obedience to the Word of God brings rejoicing. J. Oswald Sanders well said: "We are at this moment as close to God as we really choose to be. True, there are times when we would like to know a deeper intimacy, but when it comes to the point, we are not prepared to pay the price involved" (*Enjoying Intimacy with God*, p. 14).

5. Do not neglect the assembling together with a group of believers who want to gain an accurate understanding of the Scriptures and live in obedience to them.

6. The starting point for any national revival is a return to the Word of God. The exposition of God's Word led to a national revival in Nehemiah's day. It is what we need today.

The testimony of George Washington (1732-1799) is refreshing. He wrote: "O most glorious God . . . remember that I am but dust, and remit my transgressions, negligences and ignorances, and cover them all with the absolute obedience of Thy dear Son, that those sacrifices (of sin, praise and thanksgiving) which I have offered may be accepted by Thee, in and for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ offered upon the cross for me. . . Direct my thoughts, words and work; wash away my sin in the immaculate blood of the Lamb; and purge my heart by the Holy Spirit. "

7. What God has promised to bless and what He has most used through church history to bring His blessings is the strict teaching and preaching of His Word. God uses His Word to bring revival. He blesses the exposition of His Word to save souls and revive His people.

8. We need a renewed emphasis on Biblical preaching. "A revival of true preaching has always heralded the great movements in the history of the church," says D. M. Lloyd-Jones. "When revival and reformation has come to the church they have always led to great and notable periods of the greatest preaching that the church has ever known. "

9. Great exposition of the Bible will bring sorrow over sin, repentance and rejoicing. The people who obey will never be the same again. The reason is when you think like God thinks, you are thinking realistically about yourself.

Bernard Ramm tells us what should be the effect of excellent expository Bible preaching and teaching: "I feel that I have experienced a good session of Bible study: when I felt the teacher took me right into the text and not around it. When I felt we interacted with the text itself and not with the party-line beliefs of the teacher. When I felt that I had a better understanding of the text than when I came into the session. When I felt the time was basically spent in meanings and not in a miscellany of religious platitudes. When I felt challenged, comforted, encouraged, and practically instructed." We can only add, Amen!

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