

BUILD MY LIFE "THE GREAT AWAKENING" NEHEMIAH 8:1-18

"A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" I enrolled in an elective course on the life and works of William Shakespeare. And although I never read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, or any of the other assigned plays, I passed the course by the skin of my teeth by reading CliffsNotes and listening closely to the professor's lectures. Unfortunately, I now barely recall the characters in these stories, let alone their plots. I might have developed a lasting appreciation for these great works had I actually read them!

Unfortunately, my exposure to Shakespeare is mirrored by the exposure of many Christians to the Bible. They enroll in the course, and although they attend church-class regularly, they never read the Bible themselves. Instead they content themselves with secondhand knowledge gained by reading or listening to what others have to say about the Bible. Bible *reading* matters. It cannot be adequately replaced by Bible *listening*—not even when the one being listened to is a gifted pastor/teacher. Listening *alone* is not enough.

This Week's Core Competency

Bible Study – I study the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

I call it the irony of the West. There are thousands of evangelical churches in North America engaged in all sorts of missional ministries worldwide, hundreds of Christian publishers churning out innumerable academic and devotional books monthly, scores of seminaries offering the finest biblical and theological training, graduating hundreds of potential ministry

*Nothing compares with knowing
that you are doing God's will!*

– J. I. Packer

leaders yearly, as well as a host of parachurch organizations devoted to everything from orphan care to disaster relief in third world countries, and yet, biblical illiteracy among evangelical Christians remains appallingly high. It's an oft lamented problem. One admired theologian and award-winning author writes: "It is ironic to reflect that in a day when the Bible is the world's most widely circulated book, and Bible study is commended by Roman Catholics as well as Protestants, and English-speaking Christians have more good translations, study Bibles, and other helps to understanding than any previous generation anywhere in the world, learning the contents of the Bible is a more neglected discipline, and knowledge of those contents is rarer thing to find, than at any time since the Reformation" (J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 153-54).

In my view, Bible *listening* is at the root of the problem; it has replaced Bible *reading*. While evangelicals are *excellent* Bible listeners, too many are *pathetic* Bible readers—and *personal* Bible *reading* matters. They are like people who listen to Rick Steves but never travel, who listen to Wolfgang Puck but never set foot in the kitchen, who listen to Jillian Michaels but never break a sweat. They are like students who take the course but never do the research—content to take someone else's word for it.

Evangelicals, who claim the epithet "people of the book," have a high view of scripture, the one expressed in Paul's words to Timothy: "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2Ti 3:15b-16) and in the words to the Hebrews: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than

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any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

But they overlook the fact that the epithet carries implications. Their view of Scripture implies more than a readiness to *listen* to the Bible. Among literate populations, it implies an eagerness to go beyond *just listening*. Consider the Berean Jews, who were unwilling to simply take Paul's word for it. Luke tells his readers: "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and *examined the Scriptures' every day to see if what Paul said was true*" (Ac 17:11). Theirs is an example all Christians should follow—one recovered by the reformers. "The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on *sola scriptura* (on the Bible as the *sole* authority for faith and practice) returned to the biblical principle that *every believer should read Scripture as God's Word for their lives*" (Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC, 224, italics added).

We remember a fraction of what we *hear* (perhaps 10%), more of what we hear and *read* (30% more or less), and much more of what we hear, read, and *discuss* (70% or more), which leads to the conclusion that the best approach to Bible study involves all three: *reading* the text, *hearing* a sermon on that text, *writing* observations and answers to questions posed by the text, and finally *discussing* the meaning and application of that text with others in a group. This practice leads to not only knowing and doing what the Bible says, namely, the will of God, but also becoming conversant with the Christian faith.

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Nehemiah 8:1-18

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns,¹ all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

4 Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

7 The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and

teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

10 Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. 14 They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters"—as it is written.

16 So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. 17 The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day,

the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra

read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle "Ezra" in v. 1.
- * Circle "first day of seventh month" in v. 2.
- * Underline 15 mentions of the "Law" (e.g., "Book of the Law," "the Law," etc.) in vv. 1-18.
- * Bracket "all who were able to understand" in v. 2 and "others who could understand" in v. 3.
- * Bracket "on his right" and "on his left" in v. 4.
- * Highlight v. 8.
- * Box "so that" indicating *purpose/result* in v. 8.
- * Circle "mourn" and "weep" in v. 9.
- * Circle 'do not grieve' in vv. 10, 11.
- * Box "because" indicating *reason* in v. 12.
- * Bracket "the joy of the LORD is your strength" in v. 10.
- * Circle "temporary shelters" in v. 14.
- * Box "like" indicating *comparison* in v. 18.

day **2** EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. The *seventh* month was an important one in the Jewish calendar. How so?
2. Describe how the Israelites viewed the "Book of the Law of Moses" from its description (v. 1) and from the assembly's response to its reading by Ezra (vv. 2-3).
3. Explain the *significance* of the various things the people did as Ezra opened the book (vv. 5-6).
4. Reconstruct the scene by describing exactly what Ezra and the Levites did (vv. 7-8; cf., v. 5).
5. Put the *intention/outcome* of Ezra's "teach in" in your own words.
6. According to one writer, "The reading had the *wrong* effect on them" (Fensham, 219). Do you agree? Explain.
7. *Contrast* what happened on day one (vv. 2-12) with what happened on day two (vv. 13-15).

8. Explain the *comparison* in verse 17.

9. **Discussion:** Talk about any pattern for Bible study apparent in this passage that's applicable today.

day **3** **EXAMINE** – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

About Nehemiah chapter eight, one commentator writes: "Clearly we have here a revival of the community. Several times throughout the Old Testament a covenant renewal implies or is accompanied by a spiritual awakening (Exod 34; Josh 24; 2 Kgs 18; 22-23). Though revival is God's work, we should also take into account the role of the leader, the role of Scripture, and the changes revival brings. Christian revivals are always related to a return to the Scripture. The Reformation in the sixteenth century was brought about by and caused a great turning to God's Word. The turning to God's Word as evidenced here in Neh 8 serves as a paradigm for us to study and follow" (Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC, 222). The chapter can be divided into two parts. Part one (7:73b-8:12) describes the reading of the Book of the Law of Moses and its explanation—on the first day of the seventh month. Part two (8:13-18) describes the people's decision to live in temporary shelters and subsequent celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles (day two).

On the first day of Tishri, New Year's Day in Israel, the people came together—men, women, and children old enough to understand—to hear Ezra read aloud from the Book of the Law of Moses. Although the reading continued for six hours, Ezra probably didn't read through all five books. More likely, he read selected portions "in" them. A number of things might be inferred about the Law from its description and the people's response to hearing it. One commentator identifies two: "First, that what the people called for, and what Ezra ostensibly produced, was not new manifesto but the foundation articles of the faith, laid down at the Exodus; secondly that these were credited with full divine authority. The Lord had given is literally 'the Lord had commanded'; and one does not tamper with material that one would describe in such terms" (Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC, 114). Others are implied by the fact that the people stood and listened attentively

to Ezra for six hours, interjecting the occasional "Amen! Amen!" and lifted their hands from time to time to receive God's blessings. What's more, they bowed down with their faces to the ground and worshipped—all in response to hearing God's word.

On the platform beside Ezra stood thirteen men and scattered among the assembly before him stood thirteen Levites. The same commentator writes: "It is not clear how these groups operated, but we may surmise that those on the platform successively read out portions of the law (as, in the synagogue, seven or more readers might share this task on the sabbath), and the thirteen, or more, of verse 7 moved among the congregation in the intervals between these readings, making sure that they were understood . . . This day was to prove a turning-point. From now on, the Jews would be predominantly 'the people of the book'" (115). The process involved reading the Hebrew text, translating it into Aramaic for those back from Babylon who did not speak the language, and finally, interpreting the text, in other words, explaining its meaning and relevance. The point of the exercise is expressed in a brief clause at the end of the paragraph: "so that the people understood what was being read" (v. 8). The mass of people assembled made for a daunting task.

Nevertheless it was completed for when the people understood the demands of the Law, they began to mourn and weep, knowing they had neglected to obey all that the LORD had commanded. One commentator explains: "Weeping! Why? Because of the impact that understanding of God's Word was making on their hearts. People weep when they are overcome with emotion, and the emotions that cause tears are occasioned by vivid realizations of particular realities. The root of spiritual revival both in individuals and in communities (individuals, that is, in the mass) was, is, and always will be vivid realizations of God's holiness, goodness, and mercy, and of the perversity,

shamefulness, offensiveness, and suicidal folly that he sees in our personal sins. Mourning and grief for sin will thence naturally result; and when these realizations of the truth about God and ourselves are clear and strong, the tears may very well flow" (J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 155). But celebration was more befitting that holy day, so Nehemiah told the people, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared" (v. 10). After all, the joy of the Lord that strengthens his people is a cause to celebrate not to grieve (vv. 10-11).

On the second day, a smaller number of people gathered: the heads of families, the priests and Levites, and Ezra to give closer attention to "the words of the Law" (v. 13). During their study, they discovered that the LORD had commanded the Israelites to live in temporary shelters each year during the Festival of Tabernacles: "So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the LORD for seven days; the first day

is a day of sabbath rest, and the eighth day also is a day of sabbath rest. On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees—from palms, willows and other leafy trees—and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the LORD for seven days each year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month. Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Lev 23:39-43). Recognizing that the Word of God had the right to command their belief and action, they responded in obedience to the LORD's command, becoming "doers of the Word and not hearers only" (Jas 1:22 NKJV). "The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them" according to verse 17. And each day during the festival Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God.

day **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

The Message of the Passage

Reading the Bible with understanding typically leads to a confession of sin and a renewed zeal to do the will of God.

We don't want to be hearers of the word only, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22.

Would you say you read the Bible *frequently, occasionally, or seldom if ever* outside of church?

Would you say you do *The Scrolls Bible study frequently, occasionally, or seldom if ever*?

If not content with your Bible reading habit, how will you change it?

notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **Ezra** "The reading from 'the Book of the Law of Moses' by Ezra is the first reference to Ezra in almost 13 years since his arrival in 458 B.C." (*The NIV Study Bible*, note on Ezr 1:1-18). "Ezra now makes his first appearance in this book, to play a leading role in the realm of law and covenant. For several chapters Nehemiah's memoirs will give place to records in the third person. The he will take up the story again himself with the dedication of the city wall (12:27ff.) and, in the final chapter, with the account of his running battle against all things foreign" (Kidner, 113).

v. 1 **Book of the Law of Moses** "Scholars have suggested that 'the book of the Law of Moses' (v. 1) refers to the legal material in the Pentateuch, or the 'priestly code' (i.e., Leviticus), or the Deuteronomic laws, or the entire Pentateuch (i.e., the Torah). There is no way to solve this mystery now . . . It seems reasonable to assume that Ezra explained various portions of the Torah that he judged appropriate for the occasion, probably emphasizing certain sections in Deuteronomy" (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Nehemiah," 2019 ed., 43-44, planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf). "If he read 'in' it, we should conclude that he read selected parts" (Breneman, 224).

v. 2 **first day of the seventh month** I.e., October 8, 444 B.C. "The seventh month [Tishri Sept/Oct] was important in the Jewish calendar. The first day was the Feast of Trumpets, later celebrated as the New Year. On the tenth day the Day of Atonement was celebrated, and on the fifteenth the feast of Tabernacles began. According to Deut 31:11-13, the proclamation of the cancellation of debts for each sabbatical year was made during the Feast of Tabernacles. During the same feast every seventh year, the law was to be read to 'men, women, and children'" (Breneman, 223).

v. 2 **all who were able to understand** Cf., "men, women, and others who could understand" (v. 3), namely, children. "The assembly that gathered to hear Ezra read from the Book of the Law comprised not only men but, worthy to note, women and children as well. It seems likely that the latter are referred to by the words 'any capable of understanding what they heard' (cf. the similar expression in v 3). The gathering at Ezra 10:1 was similar, although there the children were mentioned directly" (H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 16, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 288).

v. 4 **on his right . . . left** "The pulpit (lit. 'tower') was a platform large enough to accommodate Ezra and his thirteen helper, and high enough to dominate the scene. There thirteen may well have been priests; and this is a further company of thirteen named in verse 7" (Kidner, 115). "Some think the men named here were priests; however, other references specify when they are priests or Levites. Most likely these were influential lay leaders in the community" (Breneman, 225). "All we can accept is that the persons mentioned here in v. 4 were important, quite probably leaders of the community" (F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT, 217).

v. 8 **making it clear . . .** "The task was twofold. First, the Levites had to translate from Hebrew into Aramaic, the dialect developed out of Hebrew that had become the spoken language of Palestine. This was comparable to the task of putting Chaucer's poetry into modern English. Then they had to spell out the application, so that their listeners would see what law-keeping to the Lord would mean for them in practice. The natural supposition is that Ezra would read a section and then pause while the Levites translated and explained; then he would read a further section, and so on" (Packer, 152-53).

v. 9 **mourn, weep** "At the literary level we are to understand this weeping along the lines of remorse for failure adequately to observe the demand of the Law . . . This need not mean that the Law was totally new to those who heard it. It is not unusual for individuals or a whole congregation to be struck in a fresh way by the seriousness of God's demand and their shortfall in meeting it" (Williamson, 291).

v. 10 **do not grieve** "There are two reason for the exhortation to rejoice: (1) the people had repented, and (2) this was to first day of the seventh month, the Feast of Trumpets, which was to be a day of rejoicing (Lev 23:23-25; Deut 16:15)" (Breneman, 227). "The powerful exposition of the Word can bring deep conviction of sin. Repentance, however, must not degenerate into self-centered remorse, but instead must elicit joy in God's forgiveness" (Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra and Nehemiah," in *The Bible Expositor's Commentary*, rev. ed., 518).

v. 14 **temporary shelters** The Festival of Tabernacles "had two principal meanings: (1) it was an agricultural festival to commemorate the 'ingathering' of the harvest (Exod 34:22); (2) it was a memorial celebration of the wilderness wanderings. Apparently through the years the harvest application had been emphasized, but the living in booths to remember the wilderness wanderings had been neglected. As the people examined Scripture here, they returned to that emphasis, which was appropriate after their new exodus in the returning from the Babylonian captivity" (Breneman, 230).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

Guess what? You're not perfect and neither are your kids. We all have a sin nature and fall short of God's glory, but in His amazing grace He loves us and desires a relationship with us despite our sin. Kids naturally look up to parents as being a model of perfection (at least until they're double digits), because adults know everything and don't make mistakes, right? So, what happens when you are convicted of sin as the people were in Nehemiah 8? Do you try to hide your sin or own up to it? How do we turn this into an age-appropriate training ground for your kids? Teaching your kids about God's grace should be a recurring theme in your home. Allowing kids to understand you make mistakes helps them understand the big picture of God's redemption and grace. There have been more than a few times I have had to apologize and ask for forgiveness from my husband and kids, but recently I witnessed something beautiful. One of my kids came to me and apologized for their mistake. We were able to have an open discussion filled with grace and love and mercy and, of course, tears. Through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, God forgave us so we can have a relationship with Him. Fully accepting God's forgiveness allows us to demonstrate the ripple effect of grace to those closest to us. We are praying your family holds fast to the transforming power of forgiveness.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Neh 8

1. From what book did Ezra and the Levites read?
2. What did Nehemiah instruct the people to do?
3. How did the people respond the first day? Second day?

What Do You Think

Why were the people weeping when Ezra read from the law?

What R U Going To Do

Make a fort in your living room or under your kitchen table. Consider eating, playing games, watching TV and sleeping in your temporary shelter overnight.

Core Comp

Bible Study - I read the Bible to know who God is and what He wants from my life.

Memory Verse

Psalm 105:1-3 – *Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name; make known among the nations what He has done.*

Sing to Him, sing praise to Him; tell of all His wonderful acts. Glory in His holy name;

let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

Series Discipleship Challenge located in KidPix Store.

Child's name _____ Grade ____ Parent's signature _____

Earn 1 token by completing the PantegoKids Bible study and another token by reciting the memory verse.

Questions: Kids@pantego.org

30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity 2 Corinthians 13:14

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace Ephesians 2:8-9

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible 2 Timothy 3:16-17

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God Psalm 121:1-2

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ John 1:12

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church Ephesians 4:15-16

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity John 3:16

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion Psalm 82:3-4

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity John 14:1-4

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship 1 Timothy 6:17-19

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship Psalm 95:1-7

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer Psalm 66:16-20

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study Hebrews 4:12

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness Matthew 6:33

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts Romans 12:4-6

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community Acts 2:44-47

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time Colossians 3:17

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith Ephesians

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life Romans 12:1

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy John 15:11

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace Philippians 4:6-7

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness Proverbs 3:3-4

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control Titus 2:11-13

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility Philippians 2:3, 4

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love 1 John 4:10-12

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience Proverbs 14:29

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness 1 Thess. 5:15

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness Philippians 4:5

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope Hebrews 6:19-20

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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