

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.

NEHEMIAH 8:6

RENEWAL

THROUGH GOD'S REVELATION

DATE

May 23 & 24

WEEK

4 of 5

OVERVIEW

Nehemiah 8-9

KEY VERSE

Nehemiah 8:6

SETTING THE STAGE

We have the innate desire to be renewed in every arena of life. We desire for our relationships to be renewed, so we subscribe to blogs and read books on marriage that can help develop a new sense of renewal with our significant other. We desire for our bodies to be renewed, so we commit to contracts at the gym and diets in the New Year. Come February, we are left wondering why we are doing hot yoga and eating tree bark and grass (but only between noon and 7pm because of intermittent fasting). We desire for our purpose to be renewed so we volunteer at local charities or serve on a board for a while. It is not surprising to want renewal. It is a longing all of us possess to return to the zest and freshness of the Garden.

If we are honest, renewal is desired throughout our Christian life. We find ourselves in a place of staleness and stagnancy that pervades our relationship with God. We feel as if we are not getting anything out of the pastor's message. Worship feels dull and has lost its potency. Times of prayer are plagued with distraction and feel sluggish and dry. What is the solution? Do we need a new routine, a new devotional, a new study Bible or a new small group? While those things can be of value, the truth is we need personal renewal in our relationship with God. Renewal in our relationship with God comes through Revelation.

Theologians have broken down Revelation into two categories: 1) General Revelation 2) Special Revelation. *Continued on page 58 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Renewal Comes through Reverence to God's Revelation
2. Renewal Comes through Responding to God's Revelation
3. Renewal Comes through Our Repentance

THINGS TO KNOW

- Revelation means "an unveiling."
- General Revelation: General truth about God communicated in a general way to all mankind.
- Special Revelation: Specific truths that can be known about God through personal relationship.

RENEWAL

THROUGH GOD'S REVELATION

Setting the Stage, continued >

Renewal in our relationship with God comes through Revelation.

General Revelation - Through general revelation, God has communicated truth to every person in a general way concerning His existence, power, goodness, and supremacy. There is plenty of evidence of God's existence in the universe around us. We experience general revelation in the beauty of the sunrise, the power of a thunderstorm, and the majesty of a mountain. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:20 *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

However, general revelation is limited. It does not reveal the depths of the love, grace, and mercy of God. General revelation does not communicate the significance of the death of Jesus; or how to receive forgiveness through a personal relationship with God. For that, we need special revelation.

Special Revelation - Special revelation involves clearer communication of God's attributes and His redemptive plan for mankind. Special revelation helps us reach beyond knowing about God and allows us to know God, personally. Throughout the storyline of the Bible, we see God using various methods of special revelation to communicate with His people. He uses angels, prophets, dreams and visions to directly communicate His will and His character to specific people. The revelation of God's character and plan for us is found in the Word of God. God ultimately reveals Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we behold God in the flesh. God revealed Himself to us directly and clearly through the Person and finished work of Jesus.

In the book of Nehemiah, we see that the people of God are experiencing a lot of external renewal in their lives. They have renewed leadership in Ezra and Nehemiah. They have a renewed homeland with renewed walls and gates. They have a renewed sense of excitement and fervency as they were brought back from 70 plus years of exile in Babylon. Even though all those things are good and meaningful, God's plan for the people of Israel was for them to experience internal renewal through revelation.¹

Introduction

In the original Hebrew Bible, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra were one unit. What we see in both books is the story of God aiding the people of Israel to renew their city and their life. Ezra was a scribe, which meant that he had access to Persian archives and important historical documents, most importantly, the Law. Nehemiah was a strong godly leader among the people. Tradition holds that he was the founder of the Great Synagogue, where the complete Old Testament Canon was recognized.



¹ John MacArthur. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997. p. 638-639;656-657.

At the center of the book of Nehemiah, we find that the people have finished rebuilding the walls and the gates of the city, at an astonishing pace, fifty-two days! They are gathered in the courtyard in front of the Water Gate. Nehemiah 8:1 tells us: "they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel." The people of Israel were desperate to be renewed through the revelation of Scripture. This account in the book of Nehemiah gives us three great principles for experiencing renewal in our life.

1. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH REVERENCE TO GOD'S REVELATION

NEHEMIAH 8:5 *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. (ESV)*

Standing is an ancient way of showing honor and reverence toward an individual. We stand when a judge enters the room. We stand at a wedding when a bride enters the Chapel doors. We stand from where we are sitting to shake another person's hand. Standing is an outward symbol of inward reverence. The people realized that when the book of the Law was opened that God was present. It was God's Word to the people that would be heard, and if there was anybody ever worth standing for it is God. Jesus Himself gives us a New Testament example of standing up in reverence for the Word as He reads the Scriptures in the Synagogue. When He was finished reading and ready to preach, Jesus sat down. (Luke 4:16-20) If the immortal Son of God stood to read and show reverence for the Word of God how much more do we need to revere the Scriptures?

J.I. Packer brilliantly wrote in his classic work *Knowing God*, "What is a Christian?... True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the Word of God."² Just as the people of Israel stood, to show reverence and submission to the authority of the Word of God, we also should show reverence toward the Word of God.

We show reverence for God's Word as we seek to read and understand it. Recently Lifeway Research polled Americans on their views of the Bible and their daily intake of Scripture. The results are staggering. In general, Americans have a good disposition toward Scripture, but few read it. Almost 9 out of 10 people own a Bible. According to the American Bible Society the average household has three Bibles laying around their home. Yet, Bible reading remains spotty. Only 22% of Americans read Scripture daily. 35% of people never pick up a Bible and an additional 30% of people only look up things in the Bible when needed. Most of our culture acknowledges the Bible as being good – but not good enough to take seriously.³

J.I. Packer brilliantly wrote in his classic work *Knowing God*, "What is a Christian?... True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the Word of God."²

The question a lot of people ask is: How often should we read it? British minister John Blanchard wrote in his book, *How to Enjoy Your Bible*:

Surely, we only have to be realistic and honest with ourselves to know how regularly we need to turn to the Bible. How often do we face problems, temptations, and pressure? **Every day!** Then how often do we need instruction guidance and greater encouragement? **Every day!** ... As the American evangelist D.L. Moody put it, "A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough for the next six months, or take sufficient air into his

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993, p. 116.

³ <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/>

lungs at one time to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God's boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it. ⁴

Solomon gives us wise counsel in the book of Proverbs regarding the Word of God. He tells us,

PROVERBS 2:2-5 *Making your ear attentive to wisdom, and inclining your heart to understanding; ³ yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴ if you seek it like silver and search for it as hidden treasures, ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. (ESV)*

**When we truly
revere the Word of
God, we will read it.**

When we truly revere the Word of God, we will read it. We will desire to seek out the wisdom given in its pages. We will search for pearls of grace and gems of mercy as if they were hidden treasure.

The Bible is not just treasure to be sought, the Word of God is life. In Matthew 4:4 Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (ESV) We receive our daily sustenance from the nourishment that the Word of God provides. The church is comprised of people whose lives have been changed by the Revelation of Jesus in the Scriptures and their submission to His leading in their life.

When we read the Bible, the Bible reads us. It discerns our intentions, weighs our motivations and pierces into the deepest recesses of our soul. As the author of Hebrews writes,

HEBREWS 4:12 *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.*

2. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH RESPONDING TO GOD'S REVELATION _____

It is not enough to just read the Scriptures. We must respond to them. Charles Spurgeon has famously said, "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to somebody who's not." When we look at the response of the people in the Book of Nehemiah as the Word of God was opened, we see they responded with worship.

NEHEMIAH 8:6 *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.*

When the people of Israel heard about all that God had done in the Law they could not help but respond to God in worship. They heard how Adam and Eve were covered by the skins of the animals in the Garden. They heard about Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh. They heard about God's guidance with the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. They heard about God dwelling amongst His people in the Tabernacle. They heard about the Day of Atonement. They heard about all these things in the Law and they were consumed with worship for God.

We can read of Jesus' birth. We can read of His miracles. We can read of His love for His disciples. We can read of His compassion. We can read of His tears at Lazarus' tomb. We can read of His battle in the Garden of Gethsemane where He sweat drops of blood. We can read of the cross where He cried "it is finished." We can read of His resurrection. We can read of His Spirit active in the church. We can read of His return. We can read of His glory extolled throughout eternity.

⁴ John Blanchard, *How to Enjoy Your Bible* Colchester, England: Evangelical Press, 1984, p. 104.

And that should produce a response of worship, lifted hands and bowed knees.

A rebuilt city with new walls and gates signified that Israel had returned to their land. But, what signified that Israel had returned to their God was their response to His Word. The people of Israel responded with bowed knees. They had a posture of humility. They also lifted their hands symbolizing a posture of surrender and praise.

Billy Graham has said, “To get nations back on their feet, we must first get down on our knees.”⁵ If you want renewal in your relationship with God there must be a reading of God’s Word and a response to God’s Word in your life. Renewal will not come apart from reading and responding to God’s voice in the Scriptures as truth is unveiled.

A rebuilt city with new walls and gates signified that Israel had returned to their land. But, what signified that Israel had returned to their God was their response to His Word.

3. RENEWAL COMES THROUGH OUR REPENTANCE

As Ezra read the Law to the people of Israel they began to be convicted.

Nehemiah tells us in chapter 8, verse 9, *all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the Law*. The Law produced deep conviction in the hearts of the people. That is how the Law functions. The New Testament informs us that, the Law provides an impossible standard that we cannot live up to. Paul would write in the book of Romans, *for by the Law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20)*. The Law does not impart saving grace. Instead, it convicts people and points them to their need for a Savior. (*Galatians 3:24*) When we read Scripture, it exposes and unveils our deepest sins. It presses against our heart to push out all that is poisoning our relationship with God.

Reading Scripture is like visiting the doctor. When you are in the doctor’s office he pushes on certain parts of your body to see if anything hurts. It is not his goal to hurt you in the process. Instead, he is determining if anything unusual is happening. Checking to see if anything is out of place or not functioning properly. He applies pressure to examine what is happening below the surface. God’s Word acts in the same way. The Scriptures apply pressure to our lives exposing our illnesses of the heart, and toxins in our souls. The gnawing we feel in our heart when we read the Bible is not to hurt us but to lead us toward healing. The goal of conviction is correction and wellness, not pain and heartache.

The people of Israel wept because their sin was exposed in the light of God’s Word. But Nehemiah urged the people to take the next step. Repentance is not complete with conviction alone. There must also be rejoicing over our forgiveness. Nehemiah and Ezra urged the people, *“do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10b)*.

The Scriptures apply pressure to our lives exposing our illnesses of the heart, and toxins in our souls.

If you look at the Jewish Calendar, Ezra’s reading of the Law was in between the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Booths (*see Nehemiah 8:9-18*). This gives God’s people an entire week of happy celebration for the atonement of their sin. This is not merely happenstance. God’s divine order for our lives when facing sin is conviction, cleansing, and then celebration. The people of Israel were struck with conviction but they were cleansed by the atoning sacrifice the High Priest had made. Now it was time to celebrate. Warren Wiersbe writes, “It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.”⁶

⁵ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Daniel*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2017.

⁶ Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, p. 113.

As believers in Christ, it is appropriate for us to be convicted by sin. As Believers in Christ, it is inappropriate for us to wallow in that state when Jesus has provided us joy in reconciliation. (*Psalm 32:1*) Repentance involves conviction, cleansing, and celebration. The joy of the Lord is our strength! We celebrate God's presence and His renewing work in us!

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

The Story of Renewal for Israel began with revelation. The people of God revered God's Word. They responded to God's Word with worship. Then Israel repented with conviction and celebration. God's plan for our lives is no different. Our lives as Christians are to be marked by reverence for God's Word, a constant response of worship, and the discipline of repentance. As we seek to be renewed in our relationship with God let us remember that renewal does not come apart from God's revelation. The book of Nehemiah is a story about broken people in a broken city made whole by the power and love of God.

As the plan of God unfolded for the people of Israel to be restored and renewed, God's revelation was at its core. As the people of God began to know God and respond to Him, renewal began to take place. Broken walls and broken hearts were rebuilt. Revelation of God's character and His Plan always shapes Our Purpose. Can you imagine your life if every day you stopped in awe, humility, and surrender over who God is? Can you imagine your life if you celebrated the forgiveness found in Jesus? That is the life God wants you to live. That is a life of purpose shaped by God's plan.