

Pine Knoll Sabbath School Study Notes
Fourth Quarter 2019: *Ezra and Nehemiah*
Lesson 6 “The Reading of the Word”

Read for this week’s study

Nehemiah 8:1–8; Deuteronomy 31:9–13; Matthew 17:5; Acts 8:26–38; Nehemiah 8:9–12; Leviticus 23:39–43.

Memory Text

“So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8, NKJV).

Lesson Outline from Adult Sabbath School Study Guide

- I. Introduction
- II. The People Gather
- III. Reading and Hearing the Law
- IV. Reading and Interpreting the Word
- V. The People’s Response
- VI. The Joy of the Lord
- VII. Further Study

Questions and Notes for Consideration

Facilitator: Jon Paulien

1. Read Nehemiah 6:1-16. What special challenges occurred around the time the wall was finished but the gates were not yet done. According to the text, who is it that really built the wall of Jerusalem in Nehemiah’s day? After the completion of any human project, what is it about the way a project was done that would cause people to give glory to God instead of to fellow humans? (Sabbath afternoon)
2. Read Nehemiah 8:1-2. What do these verses tell us about the importance of the Word of God to the people? How does this particular time of year relate to the climate of ancient Israel? Read Deuteronomy 31:9-13. What was the purpose of embedding the reading of the law in the ongoing traditions of the people of Israel? What different groups of people were included in the reading? (Sunday’s lesson)
3. When the Old Testament speaks of “the Law” what does that term mean? Why does the law include so many stories? Read Nehemiah 8:3, Deuteronomy 4:1 and 6:3, and Psalm 1:2. What do these verses teach us about the Word of God? How is the Bible

the Word of God? How would other people know that you truly believe in the Bible? (Monday's lesson)

4. Read Nehemiah 8:4-8. How was the reading of the law done on that occasion? Why do you think the people stood when the law was read? What does it mean to "bless the Lord"? What are the different ways that one can rehearse the mighty acts of God? What did it mean when the text tells us that the people in front "helped the people understand the reading"? Read Acts 8:26-38. What happened here that parallels what was happening in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah? (Tuesday's lesson)
5. Read Nehemiah 8:9-12. Why do you think the leaders told the people not to mourn and weep? When you feel guilty, how do you know that the guilt is the work of the Holy Spirit and not of Satan? (Wednesday's lesson)
6. Read Nehemiah 8:13-18. What does this passage tell us about the people and their leaders at this time? What evidence is there in this passage that the Israelites didn't really obey God during the monarchy period? What does this tell us about God? Read Leviticus 23:39-43. What were the Israelites commanded to do and why? How can we learn to rejoice in the Lord even during difficult and painful trials? (Thursday's lesson)
7. If "the joy of the Lord is your strength," what can we do to experience some of that joy? How do we find the right balance between mourning over our sins and yet rejoicing in the Lord? (Friday's lesson)
8. Read Nehemiah 8:10. How does one reconcile this text with the importance of a healthy diet? (Friday's lesson)

Thoughts from Graham Maxwell

For in Nehemiah 8, we have the record of Ezra reading the scriptures to the people. Remember, we had some good kings before who read the Bible, and there were great responses. Now Ezra does this. Look at 8:1:

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 which the LORD had given to Israel [that's not the whole Bible. That's not all sixty-six books. That's just the Pentateuch, the Five, the Torah, the Law, the teaching]. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding [and that's going to be emphasized], on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday [that's a long session, and that's only the first one], 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. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit

which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood [these men]. And Ezra opened [verse 5] the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood [that's the custom followed to this day].

And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen,"

Which means, "We endorse this. We support this." Amen had real meaning those days. It did not mean it's time for the choir now to begin the response. It was not just a punctuation mark. In fact, when Jesus was here, he put his amens at the beginning. When he said, "Verily, verily I say unto you," in the Greek that's 'Amen, amen,' which is a Hebrew verb "*âmên*" to "endorse," to "support." It says in one of the Psalms, or in many places, that after something had been read to the people, the response of the people was to be "Amen." "Let all the people say, 'Amen'". And this was said with great feeling. It meant, "We support this." In another place God says, "If you do not amen me, I will not amen you. If you don't endorse me, how can I endorse you? It's an important word. It's not just an indication that we're through with the prayer.

[A]ll the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. [Also these individuals listed, along with] the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law [does yours read that way?] helped [them] to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. And they read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Notice how much emphasis there is on understanding, and on clarity, and on explanation. And one part of that, most likely, was translation; because when they came back from captivity they spoke the language of the Chaldeans; Syriac, Aramaic. And that's remained a problem to this day, that not everyone can read the biblical Hebrew. So when the Hebrew was read, it had to be translated. This may be the first mention of a "Modern Speech Translation" in history. But if the Bible had not been translated for the people, they would not have understood it. In the days of the Reformation, what's the first thing that happened, but the translation of the Bible into the language of the people? Luther did it. Tyndale did it for England. Before them, Wycliffe had done it in 1382. He's called "The Morning Star of the Reformation." The most important thing he did was to translate the Bible into the modern speech of the common people. Otherwise, there can be no understanding.

So, Nehemiah also, 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" [they were weeping as they heard the words being read]. For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

Now, what do you suppose made them weep when they heard the words of the law? What do you suppose they were reading? Aren't they reading the Law of Moses? I was in a motel

recently with time on my hands, and I went back and read through the first five to see what it might be that would touch them this way. And I found altogether too much to report on. But there were certain places that I thought might have really influenced that congregation as they heard these words being read, then being translated and explained to them. And here they were, after the 70 years of captivity, back in the Promised Land, behaving just like their forebears. And then here come all these words about God's original plan for them, and it really touched them, and had quite an effect. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, The Picture of God in All 66 – Ezra & Nehemiah, recorded December, 1981, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

*Audio links to the West Covina series recorded in 1984:

<http://pkp.cc/23MMPOGIA66> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/24MMPOGIA66> (Part 2)

Well, what the Jews heard when Ezra was reading was something like this. God's original plan was, he would honor them incredibly:

I will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. (Leviticus 26:13)

And what does Ezra say in his speech, "Here we are in the Promised Land, and we're slaves. And our bodies don't even belong to us." And the people realized what they had lost. And they never got it back again. Remember, they were always under some other power, until under the Romans they finally revolted, and Jerusalem was destroyed. And to this day, look how it's been. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, The Picture of God in All 66 – Ezra & Nehemiah, recorded December, 1981, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

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Further Study with Ellen White

Satan is ever at work endeavoring to pervert what God has spoken, to blind the mind and darken the understanding, and thus lead men into sin. This is why the Lord is so explicit, making His requirements so very plain that none need err. God is constantly seeking to draw men close under His protection, that Satan may not practice his cruel, deceptive power upon them. He has condescended to speak to them with His own voice, to write with His own hand the living oracles. And these blessed words, all instinct with life and luminous with truth, are committed to men as a perfect guide. {PP 503.3}

The law of ten commandments is not to be looked upon as much from the prohibitory side, as from the mercy side. Its prohibitions are the sure guarantee of happiness in obedience. As received in Christ, it works in us the purity of character that will bring joy to us through eternal ages. To the obedient it is a wall of protection. We behold in it the goodness of God, who by revealing to men the immutable principles of righteousness, seeks to shield them from the evils that result from transgression. {1SM 235.1}

We are not to regard God as waiting to punish the sinner for his sin. The sinner brings the punishment upon himself. His own actions start a train of circumstances that bring the sure result. Every act of transgression reacts upon the sinner, works in him a change of character, and makes it more easy for him to transgress again. By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death. {1SM 235.2}

Rightdoing will bring peace and holy joy. {ML 163.8}

So far from making arbitrary requirements, God's law is given to men as a hedge, a shield. Whoever accepts its principles is preserved from evil. Fidelity to God involves fidelity to man. Thus the law guards the rights, the individuality, of every human being. It restrains the superior from oppression, and the subordinate from disobedience. It ensures man's well-being, both for this world and for the world to come. To the obedient it is the pledge of eternal life, for it expresses the principles that endure forever. {Ed 76.4}

The man who attempts to keep the commandments of God from a sense of obligation merely—because he is required to do so—will never enter into the joy of obedience. He does not obey. When the requirements of God are accounted a burden because they cut across human inclination, we may know that the life is not a Christian life. True obedience is the outworking of a principle within. It springs from the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer. This will lead us to do right because it is right—because right doing is pleasing to God. {COL 97.3}

When it is in the heart to obey God, when efforts are put forth to this end, Jesus accepts this disposition and effort as man's best service and he makes up for the deficiency with his own divine merit; for he is the source of every right impulse. {OW, December 1, 1909 par. 10}

The law of love being the foundation of the government of God, the happiness of all intelligent beings depends upon their perfect accord with its great principles of righteousness. God desires from all His creatures the service of love—service that springs from an appreciation of His character. He takes no pleasure in a forced obedience; and to all He grants freedom of will, that they may render Him voluntary service. {PP 34.3}

In calling them to His service, God offers them freedom. Obedience to God is liberty from the thralldom of sin, deliverance from human passion and impulse. {TM 247.1}

God's ideal for His children is higher than the highest human thought can reach. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." This command is a promise. The plan of redemption contemplates our complete recovery from the power of Satan. Christ always separates the contrite soul from sin. He came to destroy the works of the devil, and He has made provision that the Holy Spirit shall be imparted to every repentant soul, to keep him from sinning. {DA 311.2}

But in heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. In their ministry the angels are not as servants, but as sons. There is perfect unity between them and their Creator. Obedience is to them no drudgery. Love for God makes their service a joy. {MB 109.2}

The law of ten commandments is not to be looked upon as much from the prohibitory side, as from the mercy side. Its prohibitions are the sure guarantee of happiness in obedience. As received in Christ, it works in us the purity of character that will bring joy to us through eternal ages. To the obedient it is a wall of protection. We behold in it the goodness of God, who by revealing to men the immutable principles of righteousness, seeks to shield them from the evils that result from transgression. {1SM 235.1}

In the Bible the will of God is revealed. The truths of the Word of God are the utterances of the Most High. He who makes these truths a part of his life becomes in every sense a new creature. He is not given new mental powers, but the darkness that through ignorance and sin has clouded the understanding, is removed. The words, "A new heart also will I give you," mean, "A new mind will I give you." A change of heart is always attended by a clear conviction of Christian duty, an understanding of truth. He who gives the Scriptures close, prayerful attention will gain clear comprehension and sound judgment, as if in turning to God he had reached a higher plane of intelligence. {RH, December 18, 1913 par. 8}

It is the first and highest duty of every rational being to learn from the Scriptures what is truth, and then to walk in the light, and encourage others to follow his example. We should day by day study the Bible diligently, weighing every thought, and comparing scripture with scripture. With divine help, we are to form our opinions for ourselves, as we are to answer for ourselves before God. {RH, June 28, 1906 par. 7}

The Bible contains a simple and complete system of theology and philosophy. It is the book that makes us wise unto salvation. It tells us how to reach the abode of eternal happiness. It tells us of the love of God as shown in the plan of redemption, imparting the knowledge essential for all,—the knowledge of Christ. He is the Sent of God; he is the Author of our salvation. But apart from the Word of God, we could have no knowledge that such a person as the Lord Jesus ever

visited our world, nor any knowledge of his divinity, as indicated by his previous existence with the Father. {RH, June 11, 1908 par. 4}

The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found. {Ed 190.2}

The Bible with its precious gems of truth was not written for the scholar alone. On the contrary, it was designed for the common people; and the interpretation given by the common people, when aided by the Holy Spirit, accords best with the truth as it is in Jesus. The great truths necessary for salvation are made clear as the noonday, and none will mistake and lose their way except those who follow their own judgment instead of the plainly revealed will of God. {5T 331.2}

The words of truth will grow in importance, and assume a breadth and fullness of meaning of which we have never dreamed. The beauty and riches of the word have a transforming influence on mind and character. The light of heavenly love will fall upon the heart as an inspiration. {COL 132.4}

The appreciation of the Bible grows with its study. Whichever way the student may turn, he will find displayed the infinite wisdom and love of God. {COL 132.5}

God has recorded many narratives in His Inspired Word to teach us that the human family is the object of the special care of heavenly angels. Man is not left to become the sport of Satan's temptations. All heaven is actively engaged in the work of communicating light to the inhabitants of the world, that they may not be left without spiritual guidance. An eye that never slumbers nor sleeps is guarding the camp of Israel. Ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of angels are ministering to the needs of the children of men. Voices inspired by God are crying, This is the way, walk ye in it. If men will hear the voice of warning, if they will trust to God's guidance and not to finite judgment, they will be safe.... {HP 103.2}

By beholding we are to become changed; and as we meditate upon the perfections of the divine Model, we shall desire to become wholly transformed, and renewed in the image of His purity. It is by faith in the Son of God that transformation takes place in the character, and the child of wrath becomes the child of God. He passes from death unto life; he becomes spiritual and discerns spiritual things. The wisdom of God enlightens his mind, and he beholds wondrous

things out of His law. As a man is converted by the truth, the work of transformation of character goes on. He has an increased measure of understanding. In becoming a man of obedience to God, he has the mind of Christ, and the will of God becomes his will. {1SM 338.1}

In all ages God has given human beings divine revelations, that thus He may fulfill His purpose of unfolding gradually to the mind the doctrines of grace. His manner of imparting the truth is illustrated by the words, "His going forth is prepared as the morning." He who places himself where God can enlighten him, advances, as it were, from the partial obscurity of dawn to the full radiance of noonday. {ML 109.4}

The Holy Spirit never leaves unassisted the soul who is looking unto Jesus. He takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto him. If the eye is kept fixed on Christ, the work of the Spirit ceases not until the soul is conformed to His image. The pure element of love will expand the soul, giving it a capacity for higher attainments, for increased knowledge of heavenly things, so that it will not rest short of the fullness. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled." {DA 302.1}

The Holy Spirit, sent from heaven by the benevolence of infinite love, takes the things of God and reveals them to every soul that has an implicit faith in Christ. By His power the vital truths upon which the salvation of the soul depends are impressed upon the mind, and the way of life is made so plain that none need err therein. As we study the Scriptures, we should pray for the light of God's Holy Spirit to shine upon the word, that we may see and appreciate its treasures. {COL 113.2}

Christ is ready to set us free from sin, but He does not force the will; and if by persistent transgression the will itself is wholly bent on evil, and we do not *desire* to be set free, if we *will* not accept His grace, what more can He do? We have destroyed ourselves by our determined rejection of His love. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." "Today if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts." 2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 3:7, 8. {SC 34.2}

The religion of Christ never degrades the receiver. It never makes him coarse or rough, discourteous or self-important, passionate or hardhearted. On the contrary, it refines the taste, sanctifies the judgment, and purifies and ennobles the thoughts, bringing them into captivity to Jesus Christ. {CT 365.1}

God's ideal for His children is higher than the highest human thought can reach. The living God has given in His holy law a transcript of His character. The greatest Teacher the world has ever known is Jesus Christ; and what is the standard He has given for all who believe in Him? "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Matthew 5:48. As God is perfect in His high sphere of action, so man may be perfect in his human sphere. {CT 365.2}

The lost coin, in the Saviour's parable, though lying in the dirt and rubbish, was a piece of silver still. Its owner sought it because it was of value. So every soul, however degraded by sin, is in God's sight accounted precious. As the coin bore the image and superscription of the reigning power, so man at his creation bore the image and superscription of God. Though now marred and dim through the influence of sin, the traces of this inscription remain upon every soul. God desires to recover that soul and to retrace upon it His own image in righteousness and holiness. {MH 163.1}

Repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ are the fruits of the renewing power of the grace of the Spirit. Repentance represents the process by which the soul seeks to reflect the image of Christ to the world. {ML 49.3}

Christ gives them the breath of His own Spirit, the life of His own life. The Holy Spirit puts forth its highest energies to work in heart and mind. The grace of God enlarges and multiplies their faculties, and every perfection of the divine nature comes to their assistance in the work of saving souls. Through cooperation with Christ they are complete in Him, and in their human weakness they are enabled to do the deeds of Omnipotence. {ML 49.4}

Jesus knows the circumstances of every soul. You may say, I am sinful, very sinful. You may be; but the worse you are, the more you need Jesus. He turns no weeping, contrite one away. He does not tell to any all that He might reveal, but He bids every trembling soul take courage. Freely will He pardon all who come to Him for forgiveness and restoration. {DA 568.3}

But forgiveness has a broader meaning than many suppose. When God gives the promise that He "will abundantly pardon," He adds, as if the meaning of that promise exceeded all that we could comprehend: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:7-9. God's forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness *for* sin, but reclaiming *from* sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10. And again he says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us." Psalm 103:12. {MB 114.1}

The religion of Christ means more than the forgiveness of sin; it means that sin is taken away, and that the vacuum is filled with the Spirit. It means that the mind is divinely illumined, that the heart is emptied of self, and filled with the presence of Christ. {OHC 154.5}

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If you take even one step toward Him in repentance, He will hasten to enfold you in His arms of infinite love. His ear is open to the cry of the contrite soul. The very first reaching out of the heart after God is known to Him. Never a prayer is offered, however faltering, never a tear is shed, however secret, never a sincere desire after God is cherished, however feeble, but the Spirit of God goes forth to meet it. Even before the prayer is uttered or the yearning of the heart made known, grace from Christ goes forth to meet the grace that is working upon the human soul. {FLB 129.3}

When Christ took human nature upon Him, He bound humanity to Himself by a tie of love that can never be broken by any power save the choice of man himself. Satan will constantly present allurements to induce us to break this tie—to choose to separate ourselves from Christ. Here is where we need to watch, to strive, to pray, that nothing may entice us to choose another master; for we are always free to do this. But let us keep our eyes fixed upon Christ, and He will preserve us. Looking unto Jesus, we are safe. Nothing can pluck us out of His hand. In constantly beholding Him, we “are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” 2 Corinthians 3:18. {SC 72.1}

If you ask the help of God, you will not ask in vain. The Lord is at work in many ways to win your hearty confidence. In nothing does He take more delight than to have you unburden, come to Him for light and strength, and He has promised that you shall find rest to your soul. If you will find heart and voice to pray, He will be sure to hear, and an arm will be reached down to save you. There is a God that hears prayer, and when all other resources fail, He is your refuge, a very present help in time of trouble. . . . {TDG 184.4}