

# Nehemiah – Leadership Principles

## Lesson 7 – Power of the Word

### Leader Notes

**Read or have others read the introduction below before the first question.**

God's Word is powerful. The Scriptures no less attest to that. The following are but a few examples:

- Hebrews 4:12: For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.
- Isaiah 55:11: so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
- Matthew 24:35: Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

No true Christian leader can afford to ignore this powerful resource. Nehemiah took full advantage of God's Word. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 give evidence how the Word worked during Nehemiah's leadership.

1. 8:1-18

- a. 8:1 – What do you think led the people to ask Ezra to read the: Book of the Law of Moses?

**They had seen Nehemiah trust in God all through the process. They had seen how God had helped them to succeed. They now felt a longing for specifics about the Lord.**

- b. 8:2-8 – What are some things that strike you in these verses?

**Answers will vary. Thank them for sharing. The following are also some thoughts that you may share.**

**V – 2 – First day of the seventh month. Oct. 8, 445 B.C.; the New Year's Day of the civil calendar, celebrated as the Feast of Trumpets (Nu 29:1–6), with cessation of labor and a sacred assembly.**

**V -2 – Women did not usually participate in assemblies but were brought, together with children, on such solemn occasions (Dt 31:12; Jos 8:35; 2Ki 23:2).**

V -3 – Ezra had to limit himself to selected portions of the Law (he probably read mostly from Deuteronomy).

V – 3 – The reading could not continue into the afternoon and perhaps the evening (in order to cover the entire Pentateuch) because the priests were needed during the afternoon to offer the required sacrifices for the Festival of Trumpets (Lev. 23:25; Num. 29:2-6).

V – 4 – Platform was literally, “a tower of wood” that had to accommodate at least 14 people. Thirteen men flanked Ezra, six on his right and seven on his left. These apparently were important leaders of the Judean community, but we cannot identify them more precisely. Some were priests and some were laymen. The most we can say about these men on the platform with Ezra is that they were honored as leaders of the people.

V – 5 – The Book was a Scroll. (A long strip of leather or papyrus on which scribes wrote in columns (see Jer 36:23) with pen (see Isa 8:1) and ink (see Jer 36:18), sometimes on both sides (see Eze 2:10; Rev 5:1). After being rolled up, a scroll was often sealed (see Isa 29:11; Da 12:4; Rev 5:1–2, 5, 9) to protect its contents. Scrolls were of various sizes (see Isa 8:1; Rev 10:2, 9–10). Certain Egyptian examples reached lengths of over 100 feet; Biblical scrolls, however, rarely exceeded 30 feet in length, as in the case of a book like Isaiah (see Lk 4:17). Reading the contents of a scroll involved the awkward procedure of unrolling it with one hand while rolling it up with the other (see Isa 34:4; Eze 2:10; Lk 4:17, 20; Rev 6:14). Shortly after the time of Christ the scroll gave way to the book form still used today.)

V – 5 – The rabbis deduced from this verse that the congregation should stand for the reading of the Torah. It is customary in Eastern Orthodox churches for the congregation to stand throughout the service.

Praise of God before reading the Scripture has a long history, and this verse is the first known example of the practice. In the church, the congregation customarily stands (as did the people in this verse) before the reading of the Holy Gospel, which is introduced with liturgical praise.

V – 6 – Worshiped in its original sense the Hebrew for this verb meant “to prostrate oneself on the ground,” as the frequently accompanying phrase “to the ground” indicates. Private acts of worship often involved prostration “to the ground,” as in the case of Abraham’s servant (Ge 24:52), Moses (Ex 34:8), Joshua (Jos 5:14) and Job (Job 1:20).

**V – 8 – Making it clear means that the Levites repeated the words loudly and distinctly for all to hear and perhaps paraphrased in Aram what Ezra read in Hebrew for those who no longer understood the original language.**

**That is the right kind of religious service, when the Word of God is read and explained, and when all who hear it accept it in all sincerity, with praise and thanksgiving to God.**

c. 8:9-12 – What do you think this is all about?

**The Word of God contains both Law and Gospel. The Law in the text that was read and explained moved the people to sadness over their sins, which however, was not the purpose of this day. Instead Nehemiah advised the people to eat the festive food prepared for the day and to share with those who had nothing, so that all could receive the blessings of God. Nehemiah's solution to the people's grief was the Gospel: "the joy of Yahweh is your strength" (8:10). While the reading of Moses' Teaching contained Law, which always accuses the hearers of their sins and brings them sorrow and contrition, the Pentateuch also contains magnificent Gospel promises of forgiveness and the Messiah, which brings joy to the penitent sinner. It is joy in the Gospel that is the believer's ultimate strength. Nehemiah's encouragement, reinforced by the Levites (8:11), pointed the people to the comforting Gospel, so that the joy of Yahweh overcame their sorrow, and they celebrated the day (8:12).**

d. 8:13-18 – What do these verses prove about being in the Word?

**As the leaders of the community continued to study the Law, they found that another joyous festival was to be observed from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the seventh month, the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles (Ex. 23:16; Num. 29:12-38; Dt. 16:13-15).**

**This celebration of the Feast of Booth took place on October 22-29, 445 BC. The booths were constructed not only on the roofs of homes in Jerusalem, but also in their courtyards as well as the temple courtyards and in public squares. Since many of the pilgrims to the festival would have been from outlying cities in Judah, the construction of booths in accessible public places was a necessity so they could live in these temporary structures for the duration of the festival.**

**We are told that the celebration of the feast was universally observed by the Judeans and that because of the great joy there had not been such a celebration since Joshua's day.**

**This point of comparison is important. Joshua led the people into victory under God as they inherited and settle in the Promised Land. There, some forty years after the Israelites had escaped captivity in Egypt (ca 1446 BC), they could begin to celebrate the festivals God had commanded through Moses. The book of Joshua highlights the first Passover celebrated by the Israelites after they had crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, whose fruits they could now eat instead of the manna (Josh. 5:10-12). In a similar way now, under the leadership of Ezra, the people who had come back from exile in Babylon ("the entire congregation that had returned from captivity,") could joyfully celebrate the Festival of Booths in the Promised Land according to the ancient Teaching given through Moses (8:1,14).**

**We are told that this celebration of the Festival of Booths included the reading of the Pentateuch for all seven days. This is another indication of how this celebration surpassed preceding ones, since normally the Teaching of Moses was read at the Festival of Booths only in Sabbatical Years (Deut. 31:10-13).**

**2. 9:1-38**

The twenty-fourth day – Oct. 30, 445 B.C. was a day of penance in the spirit of the Day of Atonement, which was held on the tenth day (Lev 16:29–30). This was two days after the Feast of Booths had concluded, the people were again assembled, this time for a day of repentance. Already at the first convocation, "the people wept as they heard the words of the Law" (8:9). Continued reading (8:18) made them even more aware of "their sins and iniquities of their fathers" (9:2).

a. 9:1-3 – What are some of the elements of confession in these verses?

**V – 1 – Fasting, wearing sackcloth and ashes symbolized humility and repentance. A survival of these symbols of repentance is the practice, observed by some Christians, of wearing ashes on Ash Wednesday and fasting during Lent.**

**V – 2 – Foreigners, who did not believe in the true God, could not be expected to join with the Judeans in confessing their own and their ancestors' sins.**

**V – 2 – They acknowledged that they had been sinners against God throughout all their generations; that their fathers had sinned and were punished; and that they, with this example before their eyes, had copied their fathers' offenses.**

**V – 3 – This time prepared the Levites' for prayer that follows. The prayer itself may have been composed during this time of study and worship.**

- b. 9:4-37 – These verses are the prayer of the Levites. What are some teaching points in this prayer?

**The Levites use prayer and as way of teaching the Judeans their history as God's elect beginning with Abraham. It teaches them about the great mercies of God and His grace. Since they did not have books their teaching took the form of verbal repetition.**

**Prayer can be used to deliver a message as well address God. I have used it when a message of Law and Gospel needs to be taught or re-taught.**

**The notes below may also be used to explain various parts of this prayer.**

**V – 4 – Levites needed to speak loudly so all could hear their praise and psalm of repentance.**

**V – 5 – Levites invited people to rise and give worshipful attention to the psalm of repentance they would speak.**

**V – 6 – The preface of "you are Yahweh – you alone" emphasizes that Yahweh alone created the heavens and the earth. Therefore, the prayer rejects all pagan creation myths and their polytheism.**

**V – 7 – God had a meticulous plan for salvation and Abraham was a link in that plan.**

**V – 8 – This part of the prayer connects God deeming Abram to be justified through faith alone (see Romans 4; Galatians 3) to the promise that Abram's descendants would inherit the land then occupied by pagan nations, a promise that follows upon Abram being reckoned righteous (Gen. 15:17-21). The six pagan nations listed in this verse appear to be an abbreviation of the ten nations in Gen. 15:19-21), omitting several of the more minor peoples (Kenites, Kenizzites,**

Kadmonites) as well as the Raphaim, who were later deposed by the Israelite campaigns east of the Jordan (Deut. 2:11, 20; 3:11, 13).

V – 9 – The prayer in Nehemiah 9 shifts the immediate reason for Israel’s cry from the harness of the Egyptian taskmasters (Ex. 3:7) to the threat of Pharaoh’s armies bearing down on them (Ex. 14:9). This shift enables the prayer to summarize the entire exodus account from its beginning in Egypt to climatic deliverance at the Red Sea right before the prayer recalls specific events in the exodus in Nehemiah 9:10-12.

V – 10 – The import of the plagues is stated as God making a lasting name for Himself, establishing his reputation by judging the impenitent while sparing His own people.

V – 14 – The emphasis of the explanation of the events at Mount Sinai is the giving of the commandments, including that for the “holy Sabbath.” It features the only time Moses is named in the entire prayer. Here Moses is depicted as the agent of Yahweh who delivered the “commandments and statutes and Teaching.”

V – 15 – God’s free gift of relieving thirst is coupled with relieving hunger not only here, but also in Is. 55:1 and Prov. 9:1-5 and by Jesus’ gift of His own body and blood in Jn. 6:32-56. See also the free living water in Jn. 4:10-14; 7:37-39; Rev. 22:17. The apostle Paul declares that the rock that attended Israel, from which the water flowed, was Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). This helps explain why in Num. 20:2-13 Moses’ angry act of striking the rock twice, when he was simply to speak to it, was a sin so grievous that he would die without entering the land. It can be seen as doing violence to the Lord. Compare the issue of blood and water from the pierced side of Jesus as He hung on the cross – an incident so important to the evangelist and his audience that he attests it with his eyewitness testimony so that readers may believe (Jn. 19:34-35; see also 1 John 5:6-9).

V – 16 – The description of Israel’s rebellion is characterized by the accusation that they “acted arrogantly” in this verse and also in Neh. 9:29, which earlier described the Egyptians’ arrogance toward God (Neh. 9:10). The rebellion made Israel no better than the pagan Egyptians – and Israel did not remember the miracles that punished the Egyptians (“they did not remember your wonders,” Neh. 9:17). The lack of memory is coupled with refusing to listen to God (Neh. 9:16-17).

V – 17 – Although in their rebellion the Israelites wished to return to the slavery from which God wants to deliver all people through the Messiah. God is a

“forgiving, merciful, and compassionate, slow to anger, abundant-in-steadfast-love God.” The placing of God’s disclosure of His merciful nature between the two accounts of rebellion, all in the middle of the account of Israel’s wilderness wanderings, highlights His grace.

V – 18 – The retelling of the golden calf incident contains the only quotation of human speech in the entire prayer.

VV – 19-21 – These verses return to God’s mercy, recounting specific ways in which He “did not abandon” Israel (Neh. 9:19, repeated from Neh. 9:17; cf. Is. 7:14; Mt. 1:23). These four specific acts summarize the patience and graciousness of God toward His people during their wilderness wanderings:

- He continued to guide them with the column of smoke and fire (9:12).
- He gave them His good Spirit (a reference to Num. 11:16-25).
- He continued to give them manna and water (as in Neh. 9:15).
- He sustained them for forty years (a reference to Deut. 8:4; 29:5)

VV – 22-25 – These verses tell of the conquest of the Promised Land.

VV – 26-29 – These verses recount a cycle of unfaithfulness, repentance, and restoration similar to that in Judges (see Judg. 2:10-19. The killing of the prophets recalls Elijah’s claim made on Mount Horeb (1 Ki. 19:10, 14). Like the idolatry with the golden calf, the murders of the prophets too are called “great blasphemies,” Neh. 9:18, 26). Both were a rejection of God

VV – 30-31 – The Babylonian captivity is the subject of these verses and brings to a close the historical review. While God punished Israel by giving them into the hands of “the peoples of the lands,” the review ends with God’s compassion in not abandoning the Judeans, implying that He brought them back to the land of Canaan.

VV – 32-35 – These verses deal with all for God’s mercy despite Israel’s unfaithfulness.

VV – 36-37 – These verses are a call for God to see the present misery of His people.

c. 9:38 – What does the power of the Word lead to in this verse?

**Being in the Word leads to positive change.**

**This is an admission of the sins of the present generation. The adoption of this agreement was a sign of the people's repentance and an implicit plea for a new deliverance like the exodus redemption God accomplished through Moses.**

3. 10:28-39

a. What are some specific promises that are made in these verses?

**The specific stipulations of the agreement fall into three broad categories: refraining from intermarriage with pagans (10:30), honoring Sabbaths (10:31), and support for the temple (10:32-39). The first two are short and receive only one verse each. The stipulations concerning the support of the temple are much longer and more detailed. This is because this agreement is part of Nehemiah's campaign to populate the city as the holy city where the temple of God is situated. A prosperous Jerusalem includes a prospering temple, which in turn requires that the needs of sacrifices and of priests being well-supplied. While the issues of intermarriage and honoring the Sabbath are important and come first, the support of the temple takes precedence in terms of the amount of attention devoted to it.**

b. What might some applications be for our own life?

**These answers will vary. Accept with thanks for those who share.**

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**You may want give the class participants some time in class to begin doing some thinking on this matter. If anyone wants to share fine, *BUT remember this is for their personal growth and no sharing is to be expected!***

4. Lesson 3 item 7 probed the idea of personal growth in the Scriptures. Much of that could be thought of is personal devotional time. There two other major areas of spiritual growth such as Divine Worship and Group Bible Study. When many people participate in these two activities there isn't much further activity after they are over. What are some more in-depth benefits can we get from both of these?

