

The Shining Light

by Ray C. Stedman

In our studies in the book of Nehemiah we have seen how Nehemiah accomplished in a very remarkable way the task assigned to him to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem. The point of this history, as we have already noted, is given in the Apostle Paul's word to the effect that these things happened to Israel as samples, or types, for us "upon whom the ends of the ages have come," {cf, 1 Cor 10:11}. These events picture the rebuilding of a life that has been damaged by sin or invaded by enemies.

Chapter 8 highlights the fact that after reconstruction there is a great need for reinstruction. We must learn to see life from God's perspective. We need to change the way we think about ourselves and about. All of us have been greatly affected by the philosophy of the world, much more than we are aware. We have picked up from the media ideas and attitudes that we are hardly aware of as being wrong. We need to be reinstructed about those matters.

In Chapters 1-7 of this book we saw that certain words of the Apostle Peter described what corresponds in our lives to the building of the wall: "make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, love..." (2 Pet 1:5-7). Adding these qualities deliberately as we live is the way to rebuild the walls and gates of a life.

The New Testament verse that corresponds to what we learn in Chapter 8 is Romans 12:2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The instrument of that renewing is always the

Word of God. If you need to change things in your life (or you are praying for someone else who does), then change must come through the knowledge of the Word of God, through the understanding of truth that was unknown before.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Chapter 8 opens with a manifestation of a great hunger for the Word among these people in Jerusalem.

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

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. [That would probably include teenage children, perhaps even children as young as 8 or 9 years of age.] He read it aloud from daybreak till noon [Let's hear no more criticism of long services!] 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. {Neh 7:73b-8:3 NIV}

Notice that this seems to be a spontaneous gathering. These people come "as one man." No invitations were sent out. No public notice was given. People were hungry for answers to their problems, for guidelines from the word from God, and with one accord they gathered in this great square before the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the

priest to bring the Law of the LORD and to read it to them. This would undoubtedly be the entire Pentateuch – the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This indicates the tremendous desire of these people for truth. They listened, while standing, from daybreak until noon! Certainly this long attention indicates how deeply they were aware of their ignorance about life and how much they needed answers from God. They were simply crying out for the word.

Notice that the date of this great assembly was the “first day of the seventh month” on the Hebrew calendar, which would be October 8th in 445 B.C. Notice also that Ezra the priest, the author of the book of Ezra, appears for the first time in the book of Nehemiah. Thirteen years earlier he had led a return from Persia to rebuild the temple and to teach the Law of God. Apparently he had been occupied in that task all through the time of rebuilding of the wall. But now when the people have finished their work, they are desperate to hear from the Word of God so they sent for Ezra to lead them in this.

Mark also that they gathered before the “Water Gate.” You remember from Chapter 3 that this gate was the symbol of the Word of God – the water of the Word. This is surely an appropriate place for this gathering to assemble. As I have already pointed out, the congregation included not only men and women but also children who were able to understand.

It seems to me that we have come to such a time as this again. The prophet Amos predicted that there would come a famine in the world for the Word of God. People would actually be starving for answers to the problems of life. Surely we have come to just such a time in our own century. I find everywhere a deep hunger among non-churched people to hear the Word of God. Wherever it is taught with any degree of understanding, they are immediately attracted to it.

In Singapore a few years ago I was invited to speak to a group of young Chinese professionals. Some 40 or 50 doctors, lawyers, engineers and others met in one of the highrise apartments in the city. As I opened up the Bible to them I quickly discovered that they were absolutely fascinated with it. When I had to leave for another appointment, many of them crowded into the elevator with me, and others came on other elevators down to the lobby,

asking questions all the way. I got in the car and as we were driving off they ran alongside, still shouting questions through the open windows. I have never forgotten that display of hunger for God’s Word among people who had not yet been taught the Scriptures.

As some of you know, I have been serving recently as the chairman of the Committee On Biblical Exposition, and we have put on two large congresses in the last three or four years. At a congress in Houston less than a year ago between 4,000 and 7,000 people gathered every night to hear the Word of God expounded by capable Bible teachers. Among them were perhaps two thousand pastors who came because they wanted to learn what could make their ministry a success. Many of them wrote us afterwards describing how that congress opened their eyes to the power and the attractiveness of the Scripture.

When the Word is opened up, people begin to understand themselves. This is the great thing about Scripture. When you know God you begin to understand yourself, because you are made in the image of God. These people in Jerusalem were soon growing in self-knowledge as they began to hunger for the Word of God. The great tragedy of our day is how few churches seem to understand this power of Scripture. Across the country and around the world there are thousands of churches in which there is little life. The services are dull and dreary because the Word of God is not central.

The next verses demonstrate the centrality of the word in this gathering.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Misael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. [You need a seminary education to pronounce these names!]

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. 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. {Neh 8:4-6 NIV}

Clearly this is an eyewitness account of this moving assembly. I have often wondered if this has set the pattern for worship in some of the churches of Scotland. They, too, have high pulpits, at times with 20 or 30 steps leading up to them. I have preached in some of these, and it is a remarkable thing to look out at a congregation spread out below you like that. They have a ceremony there that is unique. An officer in the Church of Scotland (he is called the Beadle) comes marching down the aisle with an open Bible in his hand and all the people stand up. As he places the Bible on the pulpit they say, "Amen! Amen!" They probably learned that from this account in Nehemiah.

Then we learn how careful these people were to make clear what the meaning of Scripture is:

The Levites – Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Masseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah [God never forgets a name!] – instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. {Neh 8:7-8 NIV}

What a marvelously clear statement of how a church service ought to be conducted! The primary business of Christians is to understand the Word of God so as to think God's thoughts after him – to learn to think like God. Some of the scholars have suggested that the Levites were translating from the Hebrew language to Aramaic. But these languages are very similar. I do not think there would be much trouble in that respect. What they are doing, I believe, and some scholars feel is the case, is that they were breaking into small groups where people could ask questions and have them answered. They would listen to the reading of Ezra from the high pulpit and then they would gather in small groups and the Levites would spread out among the great congregation and give an explanation of the passage. Then people could ask questions about it and discuss it. It seemed an excellent way to instruct them so they clearly understood what the Word of God meant. It is not only important to know what the Scripture *says*, it is even more important to know *what it means!*

In Verse 9 there follows a description of the impact of this upon those who heard.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred 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. {Neh 8:9 NIV}

Why were they weeping? It was because the effect of the Word of God is to show us what is wrong with our lives, what is creating the ruin and the disaster around us. As they listened to the reading of the Scriptures they saw that the cause of their destitution and ruin lay in their own thoughts and attitudes. They saw the beauty of God and the ugliness of man. This is always the ministry of Scripture to the human heart. They saw that the evil in society came from the pride and arrogance of their own lives.

God always lays the weakness and folly of the world at the church's door, for it is we who ought to be instructing the people. When the church does not understand itself then folly reigns in society. This is exactly what Jesus stated in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 7:

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly." {Mark 7:20b-22 NIV}

All these things come from within. But until you hear the word you do not realize that. That is what made these people weep. They saw their own complicity with evil.

I have been noticing recently that some of the secular commentators of our day are growing extremely frightened and disturbed about the conditions of life in America. For example, Richard Reeves, a New York columnist, wrote recently:

I can barely stomach the newspapers here in my hometown. In the tabloids, day after day, the first four or five pages are routinely filled with stories of parents beating or starving their children to death, of children plotting to kill their parents, of people being killed by random gunshots, of people chopping up other people, of cyanide being put in yogurt at the supermarkets.

America, I think, is out of control in some very weird ways. I don't know how bad it really is or exactly why it is happening. There are obviously many, many reasons, beginning with the unrelenting pressure of living in an open and competitive society... I don't know the answer to any of this. I suspect that things will get worse before they get better.

Observe the mood of bewilderment there, the lack of understanding of why things are going wrong.

Richard Estrada, who writes in the Dallas Morning News, describes something very similar, and then comments:

More than anything else, this ugly social breakdown threatens to desensitize us as a nation. Wild West shoot-outs that kill innocent bystanders have become commonplace. Drug dealers and gang members have taken to using children as murderers. Executions of entire families by drug dealers are not unknown. Sweeps of whole communities by police bent on stopping the killing are now routine in Los Angeles.

Numbed by it all, we as a people, shrug our shoulders. Something is disastrously amiss. This is not the America most of us grew up to revere... We are demeaned as a people by this retrogression. We are less and less civilized.

Those words are not written by Christian writers. Those are the thoughts of secular commentators who see the results of rejecting the wisdom of God but they do not know to explain it. They do not know the cause of the terrible evil they chronicle.

It is only when you open the Book of God that you learn the reason for these kinds of conditions. We learn from the Scriptures that as individuals, and as a nation, we have turned our backs on God's ways and wisdom. We have ignored his laws. We have missed the glory of his plan. We have messed up the beautiful world that he gave us. When we see the sad results and hear them poured into our ears continually by the media, it makes us weep, doesn't it? It makes us sorrow for all the fine young people who are being destroyed by these terrible practices.

Of all that is happening today, the most frightening thing is the lack of a sense of sin in society.

People are doing terrible things – murdering one another, raping one another, hurting each other right and left – but they do not feel they are doing anything wrong. They have no sense of the wrongness of it. That is what the Word of God is given to correct. It awakens afresh an awareness of what is causing the wrong.

But though weeping is necessary and important, it is not the final message God has for us. To show this Nehemiah and Ezra speak up and correct the people.

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

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

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. {Neh 8:10-12 NIV}

What a powerful statement of the effect of the Word of God! When people understand it, it brings joy. "The joy of the LORD is your strength." What a great word for grieving people who see the evil in their lives and the lives of those around them, and mourn over what it has produced! The word that brings joy is that of forgiveness. God can forgive! He does and he will restore. That is what Jesus meant when he said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," {Matt 5:4 NIV}. I don't think you will ever be comforted until you learn to mourn. When you see the hurt, pain, and despair which sin can produce and you grieve over it, then you are ready for the comfort of forgiveness. That hurt is what is reflected in the prayer requests in our bulletin this morning, listing all those painful things that people have asked us to pray about. If we mourn over them, then we shall be comforted. We shall realize, as this passage so beautifully states, "the joy of the LORD is your strength."

What does "the joy of the LORD" mean? It is the fact that God has found a solution to these problems of sin. He has found a way back to sensible, sober, wise, helpful, wholesome living. How?

- By learning to think like he thinks.
- Begin to see the world from his point of view.
- Listen no longer to the clamoring voices of the media.
- Do not take your philosophy of life from what people are saying or the advice others are giving.
- Listen to the Word of God.

That is the answer. It will heal your life. “You sent your word and healed them,” writes the psalmist {cf, Psa 107:20}. The ministry of the Word of God is to heal us and create in us a desire to share that healing with others.

Notice how Nehemiah urges the people to send portions of food to those who had nothing prepared. This is invariably the result in those who find their lives beginning to be healed by the Word of God. They start thinking of others who are hurting and want to share with them what they have learned.

That way of health is dramatically demonstrated for us in the closing verses of this chapter. God had anticipated the need of these people. Centuries before, he had provided a most remarkable visual aid to remind them of the truth that would keep them from further destruction.

On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month 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 booths” – as it is written.

So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths 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. The whole company that had returned from exile built booths 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. {Neh 8:13-17 NIV}

This is the Feast of Tabernacles, a reminder that they were called as a people out of Egypt. Their departure was sudden and precipitous. They were not even to sit down when they ate the Pass-over meal. They had to eat it standing, with their staffs in their hands, dressed in traveling clothes, ready to leave. They went out at a word of command, and left Egypt in one night. When they got into the desert, one day’s journey out, and night fell, where were they to find shelter? Moses had been told by God that they were to collect boughs and limbs of trees, etc., and build booths for shelter. Then God ordained that they were to do this once every year. Even though later they had homes to dwell in, they were to build these booths and live in them for seven days. This was to teach them that they were always pilgrims and strangers on the earth. This world was not their home. All the great blessings of life would not necessarily be found in this present time but were waiting for them in glory. Therefore they did not need to be distressed if they did not have everything that those around them were trying to get in this life.

This is how the old gospel hymn puts it:

This world is not my home.
I’m just a-passing through.
My treasures are laid up
somewhere beyond the blue.

The angels beckon me
from heaven’s open door,
And I can’t feel at home
in this world anymore.

That is the truth that will deliver us from the pressures of the times. We must hold things lightly. We must not think that houses, cars, money and material gain is all that important. Even if we lack these things, the great treasures of our life remain untouched. To strive constantly to gain what everyone else has is a mistake. God teaches us to hold these things lightly. We must never forget that we are in the world but not of it. We are never to settle down here for good. I love the way C. S. Lewis has put it: “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.” We

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are pilgrims and strangers, passing through this world. We are involved in it, deeply sometimes, but we are never to see ourselves as a part of it.

What will enable us to remember that? Verse 18 gives us the answer:

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly. {Neh 8:18 NIV}

Every day they read the Scripture. Every day they saturated themselves in the thinking of God. That is what makes for realism:

- When you think like God thinks, you are thinking realistically.
- You are beginning to see yourself the way you really are.
- You are seeing your children, your home and your nation the way they really are.

For the first time you are able to divest yourself of the illusions and delusions of a mistaken, confused world. You are beginning to work toward wholeness, healing, and strengthening of the things that abide.

A number of years ago I was asked to write something on "What the Bible Means to Me." Here is a portion of what I wrote then:

The truth is not always easy for me to hear. Sometimes it pierces me and convicts me. Sometimes I wish I could evade it. And then I am reminded that it was sent to heal me. Often it encourages me and heartens me. Sometimes it restores me when nothing else can do so. It confronts me with paradoxes of revelation which intrigue me and challenge me. It exposes the secular illusions of the day and reveals the destructive ends to which they lead. It deals honestly with uncomfortable concepts and opposes the strongholds of tradition, correcting them with the authority of God.

I have learned to appreciate the Bible most because it brings me face to face with my God! That is the reason for Scripture. It is to reveal God to us. The relationship is so real and personal that it seems to be a face to face encounter. My heavenly Father becomes more real and close than any earthly father. I can all but see my Lord and Savior standing beside me and talking to me as I read his words in the gospels. Sometimes the words of Scripture become so vivid and luminous that I feel like kneeling or even falling on my face before the majesty of God. No other book has such power to transport me beyond earth to heavenly places.

If the churches of this land saw the Bible in that light, and listened attentively and eagerly to what it was saying, and learned how to conduct their lives according to the wisdom of this Word, do you think our world would be in the condition that it is today? I am sure your answer is "No!" We desperately need the wisdom of the Word to instruct us how to live.

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