

6. The Reading of the Word (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

Biblical Material: Neh. 8:1–8, Deut. 31:9–13, Matt. 17:5, Acts 8:26–38, Neh. 8:9–12, Lev. 23:39–43.

Quotes

- The Bible is one of the greatest blessings bestowed by God on the children of men. It has God for its author; salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture for its matter. It is all pure. *John Locke*
- The book to read is not the one which thinks for you, but the one which makes you think. No book in the world equals the Bible for that. *Harper Lee*
- I have a fundamental belief in the Bible as the Word of God, written by those who were inspired. I study the Bible daily. *Isaac Newton*
- We can never learn too much of His will towards us, too much of His messages and His advice. The Bible is His word and its study gives at once the foundation for our faith and an inspiration to battle onward in the fight against the tempter. *John D. Rockefeller*
- Looking back over the years, I realize the Bible isn't magic, but it is corrective; it isn't an answer book, it is a living book; it isn't a fix-it book, it is relationship book. When I confront God's word, I am confronted; when I read God's word, it reads me; when I seek God's presence, He seeks me. *Mike Yaconelli*
- You can't blame things for being dark if the light bulbs aren't working. So we're complaining about the darkness when the bulbs aren't working, and the Bible says that we are the light of the world. *Tony Evans*

Questions

What is the difference between our times and the time of this story? Is there a difference between hearing the Word read and reading for ourselves? What can we learn from this story about how we should react to Scripture? Why is reading the Bible so important in our spiritual growth? How do we see the great controversy playing out here?

Bible summary

Nehemiah 8 recounts the story of how the people asked for a reading of Scripture and how they initially were sad but were encouraged to be happy by Ezra, Nehemiah, and the priests. The reading of the Law is commanded every seven years (Deut. 31:9–13). Matt. 17:5 is the voice from heaven during the Transfiguration. Acts 8:26–38 is the account of Philip explaining Scripture to the Ethiopian eunuch. Lev. 23:39–43 is the instruction to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

Comment

Interestingly it is the people who call for the reading of the Word. They recognized its importance, particularly the instructions given to Moses. Note also that everyone who could understand were present: men, women, and children. It was also a long session!

The immediate response of the people was to cry, presumably because they recognized how much of the law they had not followed and how seriously they had infringed on what God had said through Moses. But Ezra, Nehemiah, and the priests told them not to cry as this was a special, holy day. This was to be a time of celebration, not of mourning. “Don’t be sad, for your strength comes from the Lord who makes you happy.” Neh. 8:10 FBV.

The end result was “They celebrated happily because now they understood the Law as it had been explained to them.” Neh. 8:12 FBV. This is surely the key verse in this passage. Joy comes through knowing and understanding God as revealed in his Word.

Note also that the people had to have the Word read to them. Many could not read and so this was the only way to know what God had said. This was true throughout much of the ancient world. Even the last book of the Bible, Revelation, speaks of the letters being read out to the people so they could hear the messages from God.

While their initial reaction was one of sadness, recognizing their failings, the people went away happy, because now they knew and understood. Presumably along with that went the desire to follow what the law had said. Here we see the direct influence Scripture can have on lives, especially as the people had first asked for the reading and also for explanation. The conclusion is one of happiness in the Lord, assuming that they went away promising to do as God had said.

We have the huge advantage today that most in our society can read—so we don’t have to wait for a public reading. We can pick up a Bible anytime, or read it on our phones, in a language we can understand. Yet the Bible is the world least-read best-seller.

The message from this week’s study is that we need to be like those people who asked for Scripture to be read to them. They wanted to know what God had to say to them. So it should be for us today. We should immerse ourselves in Scripture, read it every day so we can advance and grow, gaining deeper understanding of God and his nature, and seeing the way in which he is bringing the great controversy to a conclusion.

Ellen White comments

I don't command you to read the Bible—I never shall. I want you to read the Bible because you love it, not because you are driven to it, for then it will be an unpleasant task. But if you neglect the reading of the Bible, you will lose your love for it. Those who love the word of God are those who read it most. By reading and searching out scripture references, you will see the chain of truth, and will see new beauties in the word of God. While you make the Scriptures more your study, and become more familiar with them, you will be better fortified against the temptations of Satan. When inclined to speak, or act, wrong, some scripture will come to arrest you, and turn you right. It is not natural for the heart to love the Bible; but when it is renewed by grace, then the mind will feast upon the rich truths and promises contained in the word of God. {AY 79.2}

Above all, take time to read the Bible--the Book of books. A daily study of the Scriptures has a sanctifying, uplifting influence upon the mind. Bind the Holy Volume to your hearts. It will prove to you a friend and guide in perplexity. {CT 138.3}

It is proper and right to read the Bible; but your duty does not end there; for you are to search its pages for yourselves. The knowledge of God is not to be gained without mental effort, without prayer for wisdom in order that you may separate from the pure grain of truth the chaff with which men and Satan have misrepresented the doctrines of truth. Satan and his confederacy of human agents have endeavored to mix the chaff of error with the wheat of truth. We should diligently seek for the hidden treasure, and seek wisdom from heaven in order to separate human inventions from the divine commands. The Holy Spirit will aid the seeker for great and precious truths which relate to the plan of redemption. I would impress upon all the fact that a casual reading of the Scriptures is not enough. We must search, and this means the doing of all the word implies. {FE 307.2}