

October 18

Lesson 7

Food for Our Souls

Focal Passage: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Background Text: Nehemiah 8:1-18

Purpose Statement: To appreciate responsible teaching that helps us form the church into a community of faith

Nehemiah 8:1-12

¹When the seventh month came and the people of Israel were settled in their towns, all the people gathered together in the area in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Instruction scroll from Moses, according to which the LORD had instructed Israel.

²So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Instruction before the assembly. This assembly was made up of both men and women and anyone who could understand what they heard.

³Facing the area in front of the Water Gate, he read it aloud, from early morning until the middle of the day. He read it in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand, and everyone listened attentively to the Instruction scroll.

⁴Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for this purpose. And standing beside him were Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his righthand side; while

Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam stood on his lefthand side.

⁵Standing above all of the people, Ezra the scribe opened the scroll in the sight of all of the people. And as he opened it, all of the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all of the people answered, "Amen! Amen!" while raising their hands. Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁷The Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah--helped the people to understand the Instruction while the people remained in their places. ⁸They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard.

⁹Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all of the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Don't mourn or weep." They said this because all the people wept when they heard the words of the Instruction.

¹⁰"Go, eat rich food, and drink something sweet," he said to them, "and send portions of this to any who have nothing ready! This day is holy to our LORD. Don't be sad, because the joy from the LORD is your strength!"

"The Levites also calmed all of the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy. Don't be sad!"¹²Then all of the people went to eat and to drink, to send portions, and to have a great celebration, because they understood what had been said to them.

Key Verse: "They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard" (Nehemiah 8:8).

One of the great preachers of Methodist history was George Whitefield. He traveled widely in America and England. Perhaps because he intimidated other preachers, he was not allowed to preach in their churches, so he began the practice of preaching in open fields. According to reports, he had a voice that could be heard by large crowds, even in the open. He preached to great effect as well.

Benjamin Franklin told of going to hear Whitefield preach. Whitefield raised money for schools, orphanages, and other charities during his ministry. Franklin resolved before attending that he would not donate any money during the service. He brought a few copper coins and some other money but intended to give nothing during the appeal. Whitefield's preaching was so compelling that Franklin at first decided to give only the copper coins.

Gradually, Franklin relented, eventually giving all of the money he brought with him, including gold coins that had considerable value. Franklin knew another man at the service who also resolved to give nothing to the collection. That man brought no money to the service. After hearing Whitefield preach, the man began asking his friends if he could borrow money to donate.¹

We should see in this humorous narrative, not the manipulations of the

televangelists, but rather the appeal of skillful preaching. Good preaching has an impact on people and can elicit generosity. Good, sound preaching can make a difference, as can good teaching.

A New Beginning

No more complaining about long sermons! Ezra preached all morning long, "from early morning until the middle of the day," and "everyone listened attentively to the Instruction scroll" (Nehemiah 8:3). This preaching formed an important part of reestablishing the community of faith after the Babylonian exile.

Briefly, the Babylonian exile happened in 586 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar overran Jerusalem. He took the leaders among the people and deported them to Babylonia. When Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonian Empire, he allowed the Judeans (and other conquered people) to return home.

Part of the return mission involved rebuilding structures. Another vital part of the mission involved building up the people from within and enabling them to reclaim their identity. This narrative about preaching that lasted all morning describes the process by which the people relearned who they were as God's chosen people. Nehemiah led the project of rebuilding the physical structure; Ezra led the mission of teaching the people from the Torah. We can notice several things about this reading of Torah.

The people requested this long sermon. They asked Ezra to bring out the Torah scroll (verse 1). The Torah scroll would have contained the books we know as Genesis through Deuteronomy. The actual history of the composition of those books remains uncertain, but perhaps the Book of Nehemiah refers to these books in some version. These books would have contained the stories of Creation, the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, the escape from Egypt, and the wandering in the wilderness.

The people wanted to hear these stories to enable them to feed their souls and reclaim their call from God. Perhaps the people would have agreed with the psalmist, "The LORD's Instruction is perfect, reviving one's very being" (Psalm 19:7). The psalmist continues, saying that the teaching of Torah makes "naive people wise," brings gladness to the heart, and gives "light to the eyes" (Psalm 19:7-8). This attitude toward the teachings of the Bible show an awareness that these stories, poems, sayings, and even the laws enable the community to experience God and grow in faith.

Several assistants, similar to modern-day Sunday school teachers, helped the people to understand Ezra's preaching. Even in Ezra's day, people needed help reading, hearing, and understanding Scripture. Wrestling with Scripture takes effort and lasts a lifetime. God uses the preparation and wisdom of teachers in forming the community of faith.

The reading and hearing of the instruction was accompanied by much emotion. The people wept when they heard Ezra's words and the instruction of the Levites (Nehemiah 8:9). Although understanding Scripture takes our best intellectual effort, the stories in Scripture should evoke feelings as well.

God felt genuine shock at the disobedience of the man and woman in the garden (Genesis 3:11). Hagar ran in shame at Sarai's harsh treatment (Genesis 16:6). Our passage for today mentions tears and joy (Nehemiah 8:9-10). As we read Scripture, we can ask ourselves what emotions we find in the text. How do we find a connection in those emotions?

The experience of God's restoration encouraged generosity. The people sent portions of food and drink to those who had nothing ready (verse 10). In sum, then, God's actions for restoration of the people deepened their faith and commitment to the mission, touched their emotions, and elicited generosity.

How have you discerned that good preaching and good teaching

(one memorable event or over time) have deepened your faith? In what ways do you find that looking at the emotion in a passage helps you to understand it? In what ways does your reading of Scripture enable you to become more generous?

Getting the Most From Preaching and Teaching

Our passage for today portrays an event in which studying and teaching the Torah helped in the process of rebuilding a community of faith. During the Exile, the people wondered if God had given up on them, was indifferent to their situation, or was powerless to help them.

The prophets refused to let the faith die out. Now in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, faith began to grow again. Good preaching and teaching can have a powerful effect. I would like to suggest some ways that we can prepare ourselves when we hear preaching and teaching so that they have the best effect on us.

One suggestion sounds simple, but it can make a real difference: Prepare. Read the Scripture on which the pastor will preach or that the class will cover. Read the lesson ahead of time. Read from the biblical book in which the passage appears. Write down on an index card or in the margins of the lesson book two or three questions that the passage raises for you. Coming to class engaged will make a difference.

When we read a narrative in the Bible, we should ask ourselves with which character we identify. Who speaks for us? Who has experienced something that we have experienced?

In considering this particular text, we might think of people who walked away from the church but came back. They experienced a break in their faith journey. The people in this passage experienced a break in their faith journey, too. What does it feel like to have experienced distance from God? What does it feel like to

worry that God doesn't care about your problems? How does it feel to have the relationship with God reestablished?

When we seek to identify with a character in the narrative, we might ask ourselves how we can see the passage from the point of view of another character, one with whom we do not identify. When we read Luke 15:11-32, for example, do we naturally identify with one of the brothers over the other?

Perhaps we see ourselves in the role of the younger brother, the one who messes up and finds forgiveness from the loving parent who represents God. But we might also ask ourselves if we ever resent someone else's forgiveness, as the older brother did. Do we withhold approval and welcome to someone who has messed up?

In one of my churches, a man committed a crime and faced jail time. I asked him to speak at church. When I announced one Sunday that he would speak the following Sunday, my phone rang off the hook in the intervening week. I heard angry protests about my decision. The man was struggling with his faith, but he was making progress. We can learn much from seeing a Bible passage from a point of view different from our own.

In Nehemiah 8, the people act and speak as one character, so we might have trouble finding different points of view. However, some characters stand offstage. We do not hear from them in this passage. Many Judeans chose to remain behind in Babylon. They had started businesses, built lives, settled in, and did not want to return to Jerusalem. They could not share in the joy of the rebuilding.

Nevertheless, God used them as well. They provided a faithful presence throughout the Middle East. When have you chosen to go your own way, even though you felt left out as a result? How did God work in that situation?

When we find commentaries or books that help us understand the Bible, we should seek different perspectives. Mark Allan Powell writes of a study of different

cultures reading the same Scripture. Drawing again on Luke 15:11-32, Powell writes that, when someone poses the question of the problem of the younger son, Americans tend to say that he sinned and broke away from his father. Russians tend to say that he encountered a famine in the "land far away." Africans answer that, because he was an immigrant, no one would help him.²

One way to gain new perspectives is to read books by authors from other countries or ethnic groups. Scholars from Africa, Latin America, and Asia can give us new perspectives on Scripture as a whole and on particular passages. One place in the larger book from which we can gain by looking at different perspectives might be Chapter 13, where Nehemiah scolds the people for marrying foreign wives.

In studying this passage, we could learn from the perspective of a woman. Nehemiah blamed the wives for having led Solomon into sin (Nehemiah 13:26). What is a woman's perspective on being blamed for the "sins" of her husband? We might also learn from married couples who have different first languages. In Chapter 13, Nehemiah doesn't approve of children speaking the Ashdod language. What could we learn about this part of the book from someone whose native language is not English?

When we choose commentaries and other books to help us understand Scripture, we should try to stretch ourselves. For one of the Bible studies I taught at a church, I offered the class members two choices for a book to accompany the study. I told them that one book was intermediate level, and one was basic and simple. Almost everyone in the class chose the basic and simple book to accompany the study.

We need to ask ourselves realistically where we are in our understanding of Scripture; but, occasionally at least, we should wrestle with books that will stretch us. If we read something just beyond our level, even if we don't understand

everything, we might find that the challenge will help us grow.

Perhaps this advice should come at the beginning of the list as well as at the end: When we read Scripture, we should pray for wisdom and insight. Studying Scripture is not just an intellectual exercise. We should ask ourselves what we feel as we read, and we should be open to how God can use a passage in our lives, in our hearts, and in our souls.

As we have seen in the last several lessons, the people of God faced several points at which the mission could have faded away: at Moses' death, at Joshua's death, now at the Exile and its aftermath. The people could have ignored the prophets who sought to give them hope. They could have ignored Ezra. Nevertheless, by God's work through the faith of the people, the mission continued.

We thank you for the gift of Scripture, O God. We thank you for the compelling stories, the evocative poetry, the instructions that teach us how to love. Help us to understand Scripture more deeply, to live it out more faithfully, and to share it more generously; in the name of Jesus. Amen.

¹From nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/ideas/text2/franklinwhitefield.pdf.

²From *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*, by Mark Allan Powell (Abingdon Press, 2007); pages 11-27.