



SESSION 1 — A Biblical Foundation (Neh. 8-9)

- Pastor Keith -

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

When we turn to the book of Nehemiah, we discover ourselves in the middle of post-exilic literature. Having been punished by God in captivity for many years because of their idolatry and spiritual adultery, God now graciously allowed His people to return to Jerusalem. But the city had been destroyed, and much work was required to rebuild it.

The houses and temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt in the book of Ezra. Nehemiah records for us the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall. As we come to our text in Nehemiah chapter 8, the wall has just been completed. God's people had been busy. However, they had also grown cold in their covenant relationship with God. In both Ezra and Nehemiah (and in Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets during that time), we discover that the building projects had been interrupted time and time again due to external oppression and internal wrongdoing. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he had been discouraged with the reproach that was upon his nation (1:3; 2:17), and under his very aggressive leadership, iniquity had surfaced (Neh. 5) and had to be dealt with.

Now, the projects are over, and according to the end of Nehemiah 7, the people had returned home and were living in their cities. With the projects completed, the adversaries abated, and rest being enjoyed, Israel experienced a spiritual awakening unknown in that land for many, many years. We read of this revival in Nehemiah 8 and following, and in those chapters we discover what was at the heart of that awakening. It wasn't a building

project—the completion of the wall had ended rather quietly, actually. The people were back in their own homes and cities now, and the dedication of the wall doesn't even occur until chapter 12. It was no well-administrated, multi-faceted, largely-supported program that contributed to this awakening. Nor was a fear of the adversaries around them at the heart of this return to the Lord. The adversaries had been silenced and had actually at times been required by the emperor to help the Jews (Ezra 6). If programs and problem, then, had not been the catalyst that led to this awakening among the people of God, what was that catalyst?

Nehemiah 8:1 answers that question...[read text]. Finally, after years of rebellion followed by years of God's punishment in captivity, God's people submitted to the Scriptures. After a long, draining building program interrupted by numerous internal and external problems, now the people turn to God's Word.

PRAYER (that God would convince us from this and other passages concerning the absolute necessity of His Word for the stability, security, and success of the believer)

INTRODUCTION

I don't care much for mornings. In fact, I don't like mornings at all. I've tried different plans to make mornings more enjoyable—have the coffee on, purchase some donuts to give me something to wake up to, go to bed earlier, move the alarm across the room, change the annoying alarm to something less annoying. No matter what I do, I've never much liked the realization that it's time to get up.

Fortunately, however, I've never had a wake-up call as rude as Steve Hunt-Lesage had at 7:30 a.m. on August 12, 2009. That morning, construction workers awoke Steve to inform him that the foundation of his house had collapsed and it wasn't safe to remain inside. ("Good morning, Steve!") An adjoining Catholic Church had been excavating the area in order to put in an addition to their property, and in the process, they had caused the collapse of Steve's foundation and forced him out of his home.

Foundations are important. If the foundation collapses, everything is lost. The summer I moved out to Kansas City, MO, a couple who had lived in their home for 27 years heard the most horrendous crash one day and that afternoon were homeless. Their foundation had collapsed, and their home was condemned.

Foundations are important, not just for buildings, but for lives, too. Each of us is forming his life, his character, his future on a foundation. And, if that foundation lacks integrity, then collapse is imminent.

Our passage for this first session speaks to us of a foundation, and we discover here an important truth that would be detrimental for us to ignore. **This passage teaches us that God's Word must be the foundation for His people.** Just as any homeowner is careful to ensure the stability and strength of his foundation, so God's plan for His people is that they have as their foundation His firm and secure Word. That became reality for these Israelites in Nehemiah 8, and when it was, revival was quick to follow.

And so, as we gather here this evening as a "Band of Brothers," let us check our foundation. Brothers, if the Scriptures is not foundational to your worldview, then you're setting yourself up for collapse. Dads, if God's Word is not the foundation of your life, then your family will crumble. Yes, fellow Christians, if the Bible is not our bedrock, then we will never know the stability and health that God desires for His people. This is a wonderfully appropriate passage to turn to as we start, and this is a wonderfully appropriate truth to be challenged with: **God's Word must be the foundation of His people.**

That statement then begs the question: How does one make God's Word the foundation of his life? The answer to that question is given to us here. In order for God's Word to be the foundation of our lives, we must engage in four activities concerning God's Word.

1. We must Hear God's Word (8:1-3)

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 that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, 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, 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.

Explanation:

- "Gathered as one man" = there was unity in this decision to get the scrolls
- "They told Ezra" → this was a laypeople-initiated decision; they wanted to hear God's Word, and so they asked to hear God's Word; Kidner – "It was clearly a general desire...not a formality imposed by the leadership."
- "Read from it" = notice what he didn't do—he didn't "take a text and then take a fit"; on this occasion, he didn't summarize it and devotionalize from it
- "From early morning until midday" = from daybreak until noon, so probably 5-6 hours (note: men, women, *and* children); and even more than that—v. 13, a second day; v. 18, for 7 days straight; 9:3, read the Bible for a fourth of the day; 13:1, become a habit to read aloud publicly to the people
 - "My, weren't they bored?" we ask. Moms and dads read this passage in astonishment with fear and trepidation, only imagining what kind of mess their young child would have been if he had had to sit for that long while someone read and explained the Scriptures.
 - So, what was the spirit of the people like?

- “The ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law” = lit. Heb., “the ears of all the people were toward,” a Hebrew expression meaning “all the people were eager to hear the Book of the Law”; amazingly, the people’s attention was riveted; these people genuinely longed for God’s Word as “in a dry and thirsty land where no water is.”
 - Understand that people were not idolizing a book. Verses 5-6 tells us that Ezra and the people were blessing and worshipping God, but because He treasured His Word, their heart was set to hear it.
- SUMMARY: For these awakened people, God’s Word was the centerpiece. Having come together in unison to a public place where all could gather, men, women, and children listened attentively, eagerly, expectantly for many hours to nothing other than the reading of God’s Word.

Application:

- Now, some would read this passage and decry the grave problem in our churches today, because while in Eastern Europe believers will gather for 2-3 hours each Sunday in riveted attention to God’s Word, we American Christians cannot even sit through a 30-minute message without being fidgety. But, I’m not sure that’s the proper application here, although that might be a point deserving consideration. I think the application actually cuts a lot deeper.
- Much of the time, those scenarios are simply symptoms of the problem. We don’t know God’s Word and we don’t spend time in God’s Word and we don’t listen to God’s Word simply because we have no heart for God’s Word.
- And then we wonder why such great men as Job, David, or Jeremiah became as they were. Well, listen to where their heart was:

- Job would say, “I have esteemed the Words of His mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:12).
- David shouted, “O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97).
- Jeremiah testified, “Thy Words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart” (Jer. 15:16).

** These men had “treasured God’s Word in their heart” (Psalm 119:11).

- Why, then, do we have no heart for God’s Word even though we hear their testimonies and understand the importance of the Bible?

Illustration: First note from my girlfriend, Dawn → cherish the note b/c I cherish the one who wrote it

Application:

- Matt. 6:21 says, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”
- *Our hearts are far from God’s Word (God’s Note), because our treasure is not God.*
 - Because we treasure our relationships, we spend hours talking on the phone, and we eagerly fill our schedules with opportunities to “hang out” with our friends.
 - Because we treasure being entertained, we spend hours watching television, enjoying movies, playing video games, and participating in sports.
 - Because we treasure our families, we spend long hours working hard to cover the cost of living and we take vacations to fun places.
 - Because we don’t treasure God, we endure through preaching and we don’t read our Bibles.

- *Our hearts are far from God's Word (God's Note), because our treasure is not God.*
- So, how do we begin to treasure God? Well, you will treasure Him when you know Him. And knowing God takes a commitment and effort, but God gives help.
- Consider this: from what portion of God's Word was Ezra reading to these hungry, God-treasuring Jews? The Pentateuch (the first five books of our Bible)—that's all they had. If there is one portion of Scripture that we would choose last for someone to read to us from for 5-6 hours, what would it be? Second perhaps to the Prophets, it would be the Pentateuch (those books of Law).
- Folks, we are no longer under law, but we are under grace. We now have a completed Scriptures, including a whole section (i.e., the New Testament) recording for us the activity of the grace of God in providing salvation for the world. And in the record of the New Testament we have revealed for us the grace of God (cf. I Peter 2:2-3) more vividly than in any section of the Pentateuch or the entire Old Testament (i.e., they were a "shadow"!). The New Testament shares the gospel, the incredible "good news" that God loves us, atoned for us, pursues us, and can rescue us. Therefore, "we love [treasure] Him, because He first loved [treasured] us!" Friend, if God is not your treasure, then perhaps you don't really understand salvation.
- Peter tells us in I Peter 2, that the flavor of God's Word is *grace*. We love that flavor! So, trust your taste buds and dig into the Bible. If you get into the Scriptures, God will reveal Himself to you, and He will be found of you. You will learn to treasure Him, and He will give you a heart to hear His Word.

Transition: God's Word must be the foundation for His people. This will require us to hear the Word. Secondly, it requires us to understand God's Word.

2. We must Understand God's Word (8:4-12)

Explanation:

- The Israelites were not content with merely hearing from the Scriptures. Nehemiah 8:12 tells us, "And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them." There was great joy, *because* they now "understood the words that were declared to them." They hadn't just heard it; they understood it.
- How did this happen? It wasn't by accident. Verse 8 says, "So [Ezra] read from...the Law of God clearly, and [he] gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." In order to help them understand the reading, the religious leaders aided the people in two ways:
 - a. The read God's Word distinctly or clearly.**
 - Option 1 — Translating from Hebrew into Aramaic (the international language)
 - Option 2 — Kidner, "the reading was well articulated or..."
 - Option 3 — "...the law was read and expounded section by section"

** The bottom line is that they did everything they could to enhance the listeners' understanding of the Scriptures.
 - b. They gave the sense or meaning.**
 - Explanation with emphasis on the timeless principles and the contemporary applications.
- According to verses 4-8, Ezra had worked out an elaborate system with 26 assistants in order to ensure that God's Word was not only heard, but understood.

Application:

- Friend, if God's Word is going to be your foundation, you must understand it. A Word-filled believer does more than just read black words on a white page; no, He studies the Scriptures in order to understand the grace-laced wisdom that it contains.
- Oh that we were like Ezra, who according to Ezra 7:10, "had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments."
- But understand, friends, that we have a better Teacher than Ezra in instructing us God's Word so that we understand it appropriately and then rejoice in it.
 - I Corinthians 2:11-12 – "For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God."
- Our problem, then, is not our Teacher. Our problem is that, unlike the Israelites who asked Ezra to help them understand God's Word, we rarely go to the Author Himself who resides within us and humbly ask Him, "Teach me! Help me understand Your Book."
- Let us then instead pray the prayer of David, "Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law" (Psalm 119:18). Our Teacher will not fail to help us understand His Word.

Transition: God's Word must be the foundation for His people. God's Word is the foundation when His people hear His Word, understand His Word, and thirdly obey His Word.

3. We must Obey God's Word (8:13-18)

Explanation:

- The story tells us that on the second day, the elders came to Ezra to "study the words of the Law" (v. 13).
- Having done so, "they found written in the Law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the Feast of the seventh month" (v. 14). Apparently, they had read from Leviticus 23:39-43 concerning the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) and discovered that, although they had been celebrating this Holy Day (cf. Ezra 3:4), they had not been doing so according to the specifications God had given. In fact, according to verse 17, they hadn't done so since the days of Joshua, almost 1,000 years prior.
- If there is ever a hard time to start obeying, it is when there has been engrained a habit of disobeying. That didn't stop the Israelites. This was the seventh month, and so they immediately made preparations to obey God's Word regarding that celebration. Our passage tells us that *all* made booths and *all* lived in those booths during the Feast, just as God had told them in His Word. Part of God's requirement for this feast was that His Word be read publicly during it (Deuteronomy 31:9-13). The Israelites now obeyed that requirement, for "day by day, from the first day to the last day, [Ezra] read from the Book of the Law of God" (v. 18).
- This pattern of reading God's Word, understanding what God required, and then doing what God required became commonplace throughout the remainder of Nehemiah's ministry. In chapter 13:1-3, the same pattern took place when obedience followed the hearing and understanding of God's Word.

Application:

- The application on this point needs not to be belabored.
- God warns us against the great folly and danger of being a hearer and understander only, and the indictment against such an individual is that he is self-deceived—that is the height of folly (cf. James 1:22-25).
- There may be a hearing of God’s Word, and there may even be an understanding of God’s Word (e.g., the man in James discovered from the mirror “what manner of man he was”), but if there is not an obedience to what has been learned, there is only delusion.
- God’s Word is not the foundation of a disobedient life, no matter how persuasively that person argues that he understands God’s Word. See, when you hear God’s Word and understand it, but refuse to obey it, you do not deceive your family (they know your lack of obedience), you do not deceive your friends (they can often sense that you are being stubborn), and you do not deceive God (He sees your heart of pride and resistance); you are simply deceiving yourself and being foolish.
- God’s desire, however, is to bless your knowledge, understanding, and obedience to His Word, for Jesus said, “If ye know these things, happy [or blessed] are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17).

Transition: God’s Word must be the foundation for His people. It must be heard, understood, and obeyed. Lastly, in order for God’s Word to be our foundation, it must change our lives.

4. We must be Changed by God’s Word (9:1-3)

Explanation:

- Having been confronted with great amounts of God’s Word—having heard it and understood it and having begun to obey it—the Israelites now start to recognize how opposed to its teaching they have been living.
- Immediately, the continued immersion in God’s Word (v. 3) begins to change them in three areas.

a. They started to live separated lives (v. 2).

- The command given to us in II Corinthians 6:17 which says, “‘go out from their midst and be separate from them,’ says the Lord, ‘and touch no unclean thing,’” was first given to Israel in Isaiah 52:11.
- Now, they were finally doing that.

b. They started to confess their sins (v. 2, 3).

- Most of chapter 9 is a prayer of confession.
- They recognized the error of their fathers in “cast[ing] [God’s] Law [i.e., God’s Word] behind their back” (9:26). They committed to not repeat that error.

c. They started to worship God (v. 3).

- Chapter 9 is a prayer of worship. God had become even bigger to them and they had come to know Him in an even more real, more accurate way.
- They acknowledged God’s uniqueness (v. 7), power (v. 6), grace (v. 7-8), righteousness (v. 8), revelation (v. 13), forgiveness/patience, compassion/lovingkindness (v. 17), provision/instruction (v. 20), justice (v. 33), and admonishment/chastening (v. 29).
- They begged Him for deliverance (v. 36-37).

- God’s Word had begun to change their lives from the inside out. They were not following God in rote obedience; they were loving God with their heart, soul, mind, and strength. And their hearts and lives were being transformed.

Application:

- Concerning our passage and its place in Israel’s history, one author noted, “From now on, the Jews would be predominantly ‘the people of a book’” (Kidner). God’s Word had become their foundation. They had heard God’s Word and understood it; they had obeyed its instructions and were now allowing it to change their lives from the inside out.
- However, over the next several centuries, their activity towards God’s Word would slowly begin to change.
 - A group called the Pharisees arose, and they continued this renewed emphasis on the importance of God’s Word as the foundation of His people.
 - They stressed that people must hear it and understand it, and the synagogue developed into a place where such hearing and instruction took place. They also emphasized obedience to the Scriptures, and they were so careful themselves to obey God’s Word that Christ said of them, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).
 - The one point that they no longer stressed was the importance of allowing God’s Word to change one’s heart. Their interaction with God’s Word was merely external; internally, they were “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:28).
- Oh how we must avoid such a legalistic, works-oriented approach to God’s Word! Oh how we must avoid the error

of hearing, understanding, and obeying the commands of the Bible without ever letting it take our heart and transform us into the image of Christ.

- God’s desire for us as we interact with His Word is that as we “[behold] as in a glass the glory of the Lord [we will be] changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18, KJV).
- One who has set God’s Word as the foundation of his life will avoid the legalistic error of the Pharisees. He will move beyond mechanical obedience and will submit himself to the transforming power of the Word to change him and make him like Jesus.
- How does this play out practically?
 - You will be changed after you are immersed in God’s Word. Ephesians 5:26 says that you will be “sanctified and cleansed,” not by perusing God’s Word, not by reading it once a day, not by hearing it on Sundays, but by the “washing of [lit. *bathing in*] water by the Word.” You can never have too much of this very good thing.
 - So, some of you are immersed in an individual, some of you are immersed in a sport, some of you are immersed in your studies, some of you are immersed in your appearance, some of you are immersed in an illicit pleasure. And, so, until you are immersed in the Bible, you will never know life as it is supposed to be lived (cf. “Man shall not live by bread alone...”) and you will never see your life changed.

CONCLUSION

God’s Word must be the foundation for the people of God. You will know that God Word is indeed the foundation of your life when you are committed to and engaged in *hearing* God’s Word, *understanding* God’s Word, *obeying* God’s Word, and *allowing* God’s Word to transform you.

Perhaps your life is crumbling this evening. Let me encourage you to check your foundation. Brother, God's Word must be the foundation of your life—your affections, your choices. Dads, God's Word must be the foundation of your home. Men, God's Word must be the foundation of your workplace. Fellow believers, God's Word must be the foundation of this group. Our church will only be as strong as is its focus upon the Scriptures. *May God help us to treasure Him so that we have a heart set to make His Word the foundation of our lives.*