



SESSION 5

PRIORITIZE

▶ **The Point**

God's Word must be central to our lives to truly serve Him.

▶ **The Passage**

Nehemiah 6:1-3,15-16; 8:1-3,5-8

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

It took a drunk man to teach me a great truth about the Bible. I was at a men's Monday night Bible study when we heard a beat-up, old car screech in the church parking lot. A man was pushed out of the car. He stumbled to the door and began to share about his struggles. Then he said to me, "You look like a preacher. Tell me what to do." At the time, I was a banker!

Since I didn't know how to respond, I randomly opened my Bible and began to read a psalm—one in which David asked God to kill his enemies! I cringed at every word. Then the guy interrupted, "That's what I need! I need Jesus!" Christ's name was not in the psalm! God's Word worked, in spite of my hasty verse selection. We sobered him up and led him to Christ. He joined the church and stayed focused on God's Word. As they rebuilt Jerusalem's walls, Nehemiah and the Jewish people learned the importance of focusing on God's Word. Since God's Word was central to them, they had insight in how to serve Him.

▶ **The Setting**

Nehemiah had demonstrated wise leadership by resolving the quarrel within the Jewish community (see Neh. 5:1-13) and by refusing to follow the pattern of former governors who had abused their authority. (See vv. 14-19.) This allowed the people to focus on securing themselves against outside enemies and completing the wall project. (See 6:1-19.) With the huge task complete, more people could return to the city (see 7:1-73) and the leaders could turn their attention to the next challenge—restoring a spiritual culture that honored God. (See 8:1-18.)

What does the Bible say?

Month Elul (6:15)—Sixth month of the Hebrew year, roughly aligned with parts of August and September (and possibly October).

The book of the law of Moses (8:1)—The Pentateuch. This is what we commonly know as the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Nehemiah 6:1-3,15-16; 8:1-3,5-8

6:1 When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and that no gap was left in it—though at that time I had not installed the doors in the city gates—² Sanballat and Geshem sent me a message: “Come, let’s meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley.” They were planning to harm me. ³ So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing important work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?”

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6:15 The wall was completed in fifty-two days, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul. ¹⁶ When all our enemies heard this, all the surrounding nations were intimidated and lost their confidence, for they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God.

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8:1 all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel. ² On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. ³ While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

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8:5 Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, “Amen, Amen!” Then they knelt low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, who were Levites, explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. ⁸ They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.

Nehemiah 6:1-3,15-16 Commentary

[Verse 1] As the work continued to progress, pressure from the external forces continued to increase. Foreign leaders may have felt more threatened than ever as they were unable to hinder the work or shake unflappable Nehemiah. The main sections of the wall had essentially been completed with no gaps or bare spaces, making it much more secure. Only installing the doors at each of the gates remained. Jerusalem was once again a walled city. Nehemiah was not taking credit for the wall; but from the enemies' perspective, he was the key, the strategic force behind the Jewish work. He was about to become the primary target of the opposition.

[Verse 2] Having tried intimidation and manipulation, Sanballat and his companions tried a new method: distraction based in deception. They planned to draw Nehemiah away from the city for a meeting. Nehemiah was not fooled. He understood the enemies' motives were not just deceitful, but also violent. Instead of planning for peace, they were scheming to do him harm—probably even to kill him. With Nehemiah out of the way, the Jews' enemies could again step into the leadership void and take control of the situation.

[Verse 3] Nehemiah's response was concise and simple. The work was too important to waste time on pointless meetings or to negotiate with the enemy. **Down** is a common term in reference to Jerusalem. Because it was built on a mountain, any departure from the city would put travelers on an immediate downhill slope. But the meaning also carries symbolic significance. Leaving the work—even if the cause had been legitimate—would have been a move in the wrong direction—a step down. But Nehemiah's initial refusal did not deter Sanballat. He made the same offer four times. (See v. 4.) Each time, Nehemiah declined. Then Sanballat made up a report about an ensuing rebellion. (See vv. 5-9.) Finally, the foreign leaders turned to intimidation. (See vv. 10-14.) In each instance, Nehemiah refused to be distracted. He kept his focus on doing God's work until the job was done.

[Verse 15] And that job was completed in record time—the entire wall repaired and rebuilt in **fifty-two days**, less than two months. The enemy had tried desperately to defeat God's people and God's work. But God's leader had maintained focus and helped the people do the same. As a result, the work was finished on the 25th of Elul, the sixth month of the Jewish year. Because Nehemiah first spoke with the king in the first month (see 2:1), that means he secured permission, left Persia, arrived in Jerusalem, organized the people, and completed the wall in six months.

[Verse 16] While the Jews celebrated their incredible accomplishment, the reaction from their enemies is just as noteworthy: they **were intimidated and lost their confidence**. The ones who had so arrogantly attempted intimidation now had the tables turned on them. Even these enemies recognized the rebuilding of the wall stretched beyond human explanation. Like the residents of Jerusalem, they saw God's hand at work—His hand of provision and of protection. They had not stopped the work and had not thwarted God's plan.

Nehemiah 8:1-3 Commentary

[Verse 1] The repair of the city's walls brought a new influx of Israelites into the city. Once the physical restoration had taken place, Nehemiah was eager to begin the spiritual restoration of the people. He had emphasized the importance of community in 5:1-13. As the story shifts to the spiritual revival, the community again is emphasized. Nehemiah used the term "people" repeatedly in 8:1-12. In the majority of those uses, the phrase includes "all the people." Again, the law affected each individual, but it also served as the template for community standards as well.

Nehemiah's first action was to call a sacred assembly for the entire community. Ezra the scribe would present the **law of Moses** to the people. Nehemiah wanted to ensure the people understood the foundation for their expected social fabric. God had given the law to Israel serves as a reminder that it was not just an optional document filled with nice ideas. It was God's words to the people. As He had spoken in Moses' day, obeying the law would produce blessings, while ignoring it would produce curses. Previous generations had experienced the curses of disobedience. Nehemiah was determined to start fresh now that the opportunity had come.

[Verse 2] It should be noted that in addition to the people, this event focused attention on the law. Ezra brought the law to the people at the request of the people. Having seen God do great things in their city and their lives, the people's hearts were ready for a spiritual revival. They wanted to renew their covenant with the Lord. Likewise, the audience was not a select demographic from the city's upper crust. The people showed up from every age group, gender, and social class. Just as the physical wall had been established to ensure safety, the cultural walls that had separated Jew from Jew for so long were being torn down in the name of fellowship. Even children were included in the assembly. The only requirement to attend was an ability to hear God's Word and understand its implication for individuals and the community.

[Verse 3] A place for reading was established around the **Water Gate**. Verse 4 states that a large wooden platform was erected so Ezra could be seen by the crowd. It also notes that he "shared the stage" so to speak with several others. Some have suggested these men were priests or Levites; but, more likely, they were influential men in the city who represented the leadership of the community. This was not a light reading of the Scripture. It was thorough and lasted from **daybreak until noon**. So, for several hours, Ezra brought the law to the people. He might not have read the entire five books of law because it would have taken much longer than the time described. But the Hebrew wording allows for some wiggle room in this regard. He likely read important portions that would have had the greatest significance to the people at the time. For their part, the people responded appropriately. Nehemiah said they **listened attentively** in order that they could be doers of the Word and not just hearers. (See Jas. 1:22.)



15 minutes

STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

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Nehemiah 8:5-8

⁵ Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, "Amen, Amen!" Then they knelt low and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, who were Levites, explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. ⁸ They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Nehemiah 8:5-8 on page 119 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 119 of the PSG: "What are some ways we can make the Word of God a bigger part of our day?"

RECAP: Ezra and thirteen other men stood on a large wooden platform. Ezra "opened the book," or more technically, unrolled the scroll of God's Word. The Word of God led the people to worship, and their worship was both vocal and physical. They shouted, "Amen, Amen!" an expression of confirmation and agreement with God's Word. Worship is a natural response to hearing and accepting the truth God had revealed.

LEADER PACK: In advance, make enough copies of Pack Item 10, "History of the Bible" handout for your group members. Allow volunteers to read aloud different events on the chart to help the group better understand how the Bible was handed down to us.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 119 of the PSG: "Why do you think it's important for us to study the Bible as a group and not just by ourselves?"

GUIDE: Refer back to "The Point" for this session: "God's Word must be central to our lives to truly serve Him."

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What tools do you enjoy that deepen your study of God's Word?

HISTORY OF THE BIBLE	
1400-800 BC	Books of the Hebrew Old Testament written
280-100 BC	The Septuagint, a popular Greek translation of the Old Testament, produced.
AD 45-97	Books of the Greek New Testament written.
98 and 118	Councils of Nicea give final affirmation to the Old Testament canon (39 books).
140-150	Marcion's heretical "New Testament" includes authentic Christians to establish a New Testament canon.
160-325	Dionysius's persecution includes confiscating and destroying New Testament Scriptures.
300-330	Letter of Athanasius' Greek New Testament text becomes a foundation for the Bible.
367	Athanasius's Festal Letter lists complete New Testament canon (27 books for the first time).
387	Council of Carthage establishes orthodox New Testament canon (27 books).

Nehemiah 8:5-8 Commentary

[Verse 5] Standing on the platform, Ezra could read from the book, and the people could hear what was being read. Think of the entire assembly standing out of respect for God's Word, especially considering that they stood for approximately six hours. Perhaps they stood as a sign of reverence, as an invitation for God's presence. Their response indicates they understood the significance of these events and were prepared to have their hearts touched by God's Word. Their attitude points out the importance of preparing one's heart for receiving God's Word before hearing it.

[Verse 6] When God's Word is handled appropriately, He is honored and praised. The public reading started to take the form of a public worship service as Ezra **blessed the Lord**. He acknowledged the greatness of God. Essentially, he was offering an invitation for God to move and make Himself known through their time together. The people responded with a dual **"Amen."** The term carries the idea of "let it be done" or "so be it." It affirms the truth of the statement that precedes it. The people were standing with Ezra in his blessing and were affirming the awesome nature of God in a powerful way. Their response also shows that they were not worshiping the Law, but the God who stood behind the Law. From a standing position that honored the sacred nature of God's Word and His presence, the people shifted into a position of humility. Coming face-to-face with God through His Word, they worshiped by bowing **with their faces to the ground**. They were fully invested in the worship. For them, it was a physical experience as well as an emotional and spiritual experience.

[Verse 7] While the individuals who joined Ezra on the podium were not identified as Levites, the men named in verse 7 were. And their job was clear—they went throughout the crowd explaining the Law to the people. A whole generation of Jews had been born and raised outside of Israel. We cannot assume they were familiar with the contents of the Law. Years of exile outside Judah for some and years under the oppression of foreign powers for others could have created gaps in their basic knowledge and understanding of God's Law. The Levites were bridging the gap for the people.

[Verse 8] Part of the Levites' work included interpreting the Word for the people. There could have been language barriers that interfered with the connection between reading and understanding. Another possibility is that the Levites were breaking the Law into sections that would have been more manageable for the people, essentially interpreting the text paragraph by paragraph. It's also possible the Levites were interpreting the meaning of the Law in greater detail. It is probably better to understand their work as giving an Aramaic translation to a Hebrew text. These verses emphasize that Ezra and the Levites were committed to making the Law clear. As a new day dawned in Jerusalem, the people needed a solid grasp on what God had to say and what He expected from them.



Read the article "Synagogue Worship, Its Origins" in the 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "Sanballat & Tobiah" (Winter 2014-2015), "Gates and Gatekeepers" (Winter 2014-2015), "Postexilic Hebrew Worship Practices" (Winter 2006-2007), and "Ezra, Scribe and Priest" (Winter 2006-2007) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicallillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 120 of the PSG. Encourage them to complete the following activities:



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Read.** Make the reading of God’s Word a daily priority. Adopt a Bible reading plan or use a devotional guide to help you read systematically through the Scriptures.
- ▶ **Study.** In addition to being a part of a weekly Bible study group, plan for a time of concentrated study by yourself or with one to two other people. One option is to take the passage you study each week in your group and study it further.
- ▶ **Memorize.** Hide God’s Word in your heart through memorization. Memorize one to two verses a week that encourage you, challenge you, and help you draw closer to Christ. Apps like ScriptureTyper can be used on your phone or tablet to help you memorize scripture during the week.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the final paragraph from page 120 of the PSG:

God’s Word must be central to your life in order to serve Him faithfully. Cherish your time in the Word, and God will honor your efforts.

PRAY: Conclude by praising God for His sovereignty and care. Thank Him for the precious gift of His Word, the Bible.



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