

**BACK TO THE BIBLE**

Nehemiah 7:72b – 8:18

Key verse 8:3

„He read it aloud from daybreak till noon 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.“

We thank the Lord for encouraging us through Nehemiah's awareness of history to be used in God's history, for the spiritual reconstruction of Germany and Europe. May the Lord help us to walk resolutely in the footsteps of the faith of our predecessors in faith and to be used as history makers. Our lesson today, Nehemiah chapter 8, tells of a decisive turning point in God's people: The people became very hungry and thirsty for God and for His Word. Their ears were completely turned to the Word of God. God's one-sided, unchanging and forgiving love led the people to repentance, obedience and restoration of their spiritual identity as God's people. God bless each one of us to return to the Bible in this hour so that God's Word may once again take authority and the first place in our lives and we may be used as Bible teachers and royal priests for Germany, Europe and for world mission.

**1. Preparation by Ezra and Nehemiah (1-3)**

Let us look at verses 7:72b and 8:1: "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." As we studied, the reconstruction of the broken wall of Jerusalem was accomplished in only 52 days. Only a short time ago it seemed that this work could not be accomplished at all because of the attacks by the enemies of God's people. Its completion in 52 days was a revelation from God. The Israelites recognized by this that God had not forsaken them, although they had left him and ignored him and excluded him from their lives. Rather,

God still wanted to be their God and they were still to be His people.

But the restoration of the physical walls of Jerusalem could only be a beginning of the restoration of the people. The building of the walls could only be an occasion for conversion, a sign of the living God. And so the Israelites came together as one man, formed into one unit, to take the next step and develop a love relationship with God. They knew that for this they needed Ezra to hear God's voice, to respond to the Word of God with repentance and to offer their lives to God. They were ready to hear from God. They were ready to repent and make a new beginning as God's people with the Word of God.

The Israelites called Ezra, the scribe. This shows that God's work of spiritual renewal could happen in a carefully prepared environment. Namely in the spiritual environment that Ezra had prepared. Ezra returned to Jerusalem about 13 years before Nehemiah. Although he took care of the worship service in the temple, the teaching of the Word of God was the center of his activity. He himself studied the Word of God in depth, faithfully led a life before God according to the Word of God and also taught it among the people (Ezra 7:10). However, when Nehemiah inquired about the condition of Jerusalem and the returnees before his return, he learned that they were "living in great misery and disgrace" (1:3). A sign of this were the broken walls of the city. "In great misfortune and in ignominy" shows that there was great despair and spiritual darkness over Jerusalem. Despite this dark spiritual situation, Ezra lived by the Word of God and preached the Word of God unceasingly and faithfully. The fruits of his min-

istry did not really seem to be particularly encouraging. But his work was indispensable as a preparation of the environment for the work of God.

Nehemiah was a high official in the Persian royal house. He returned when he heard the sovereign intervention of God that the heart of the Persian king Artahsasta was opened to his cause, so that he gave Nehemiah everything he asked him to rebuild Jerusalem and allowed him to travel to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was able to implant God's vision and confidence for the project of rebuilding the walls into the hearts of the Israelites as he testified to the work of God that he had experienced. Nehemiah helped the Israelites to experience God's help and God's grace in a practical way by helping to build the walls, and he always strengthened and renewed God's vision in their hearts. During this time, Ezra acknowledged the spiritual leadership of Nehemiah and worked in the background.

Nehemiah and Ezra had both in different ways prepared the environment for the work of God, for the work of spiritual renewal of the people. We do not know when the time of spiritual revival will come. Sometimes it comes just after the time of deepest darkness, despair and hopelessness. But God blesses prayer, Bible study, faithful ministry of the Word of God as a preparation for the environment of His work.

Thus, in a dark and hopeless time full of possessed people, Zacharias and Elizabeth also prepared the spiritual environment for spiritual renewal by living a pious life according to the Word of God and by placing their only begotten Son, John the Baptist, at the disposal of God to fulfill his mission before God. Through him they saw the hope of God, namely the rising light from on high after the dark night. Let us also faithfully and undauntedly serve the work of the Word of God and prepare for the time of spiritual revival, rejoicing in it through faith and giving thanks to God.

Let us look at verses 2-3: "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. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the peo-

ple listened attentively to the Book of the Law." All who could understand the word of God gathered together and heard the words of the law of God from the early morning till noon. And their hearts were turned to the word of God. They listened with focus and a God-fearing heart. Everything else was unimportant for them at that moment: work, finances, children. Her heart was turned to the Word of God alone. They were ready to accept God's word and to apply it in their lives. They were ready to let God be Lord and King in their lives.

## 2. Revival through cooperation of superiors and Levites (4-8)

Let's look at verse 4: "Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam." In verse 4 we see that Ezra was not alone in the pulpit, but that there were others beside him whose names are mentioned. They were different people, some upper class, some ordinary Israelites. Perhaps they took turns reading the law aloud for the six hours. In addition, by doing so they testified their support for Ezra. Spiritual cooperation of all is very important for the work of God in the people of God. God can work not through lone warriors, but through spiritual unity. Spiritual unity, which shows itself in cooperation, is also a prerequisite for a lasting and profound renewal.

Ezra also worked together with Levites whom he had trained during the 13 years of his ministry in Jerusalem. Let us look at verses 7 and 8: "The Levites-Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Peliah-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." The author emphasizes by repetition that the Israelites should not only passively hear the Word of God, but also understand it. In the time of spiritual darkness and despair, Ezra had found some spiritually hungry people and taught them the Word of God, so that they could now interpret the Word of God as Levites. They were able to interpret the Word of God so well that everyone, regardless of their education, understood the Word of

God well. We pray for the spiritual renewal among the students in Germany and Europe. Even in a dark time we can have confidence in the coming spiritual revival through God's Spirit and prepare the environment for it. Ezra and Nehemiah encourage us to serve the ministry of Bible research, prayer, one-to-one Bible study and discipleship and to raise up many spiritual co-workers and disciples of Jesus who can serve the hungry and desperate people with the Word of God and lead them to Jesus.

We thank God that the next generation will grow as spiritual workers for the work of God, namely as prayer servants and as Bible teachers. In the preparation for spiritual renewal, the work of educating disciples, namely the formation of Gospel workers and spiritual leaders, is very important. The Levites with whom Ezra worked show us God's hope that our next generation will also grow into Bible teachers who can interpret God's word to the people, lead them to repentance and be precious used for the spiritual renewal of Europe.

Let us look at verses 5 and 6: "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." It is very important to hear God's word with the right attitude of the heart as God's word. To thank and praise God is the first duty of all men. In sin, we constantly grumble about our conditions, about teachers, about studies, about others. But in God we have reason to thank and praise God under all circumstances. This is why 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Be thankful in all things; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus upon you." The Israelites responded to this praise of God with "Amen! Amen!" The sermon was not a one-sided lecture, which they listened to passively and sometimes falling asleep, but the living Word of God, to which they listened with fear of God and with inner compassion and inner reaction to it.

For the Word of God we need the right attitude of the heart, because God's words are not human words, but God's living words. This is why Peter said in John 6:68,69: "Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and

know that you are the Holy One of God." And in 2 Timothy 3:16, the Apostle Paul encourages his spiritual son Timothy with the words: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." The words of God in the Bible are words of life. Jesus therefore said to His disciples in John 8:31,32: "...If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

### **3. Return to God through repentance and conversion (9-12)**

Let's look at verse 9: "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." Here we see that the group Bible study did not impart useless knowledge, but was about the relationship with God and led the people to tears of repentance. They cried because they had lived without God for so long and had ignored and excluded God in their lives. Being spiritually ignorant does not seem to be a sin. But when we meet God personally, we recognize our sin, namely, above all, that we ignored the living God, our Creator and good shepherd, and lived for ourselves and our ego. Repentance is the first sign of spiritual revival. Repentance means not just showing regret, but receiving God's love in Jesus, giving up our rebellion against God and turning back to God.

We thank God that we have also received this spiritual heritage through our Bible teachers, namely to study God's Word with a personal touch and thereby to meet Jesus and repent. May God also help us today to interpret God's Word in an understandable way, like the Levites, and to lead the seeking, unbelieving young students to repentance and new life in Jesus.

The disciple of Jesus, Peter, was actually not a person who was plagued by self-doubt. But when he experienced Jesus' wonderful work through the wonderful fishing, he fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Lord, go away from me. I am a sinful man." Peter was filled with the fear of God. The encounter with the living God breaks the shell of our ego and leaves us broken and

naked, coming to Him as we really are.

John Wesley was born in England in 1703 in a Pietist home. In Oxford he joined the group of Methodists who led a strict Christian life. John Wesley even went to the USA as a missionary, but instead of leading others to faith there, he came back full of self-doubt. As a missionary, he met co-workers from Zinzendorf's Bohemian Brotherhood who persistently taught him the Jesus-centered gospel. Finally, Peter Böhler helped the desperate Wesley through testimonies from his co-workers and through the study of the Letter to the Romans. Wesley repented of his proud ego and self-righteousness and began to ride his horse throughout England and Scotland, preaching the Word of God with all his might, four or five times a day. His personal struggle for years for the right relationship with God and his repentance of his ego had a great impact throughout England, so that countless people repented, gave up drinking, returned stolen goods, criminals turned themselves in to the police. A person's penance is no small thing. It has true awakening power for a whole generation, so that England was saved from the bloody battles in France and instead was transformed into a royal priesthood and a missionary sending country.

I too was allowed to receive the love of Jesus through His vicarious death on the cross by Romans 3:24, confess that I am an ordinary, hopeless sinner and receive Jesus as my only hope and salvation. Until then I led a desperate and depressed life. I wanted to be changed, but I did not know how. But through a Word of God, God opened my spiritual eyes and led me to repent of my spiritual sins and to a new life of faith in faith. Jesus gave me the victory over ego and I was allowed to begin a servant, devoted life for God's entrusted flock of sheep and for world mission.

Dr. Samuel Lee, the co-founder of our church, also left us the admonition "Back to the Bible" as his spiritual heritage. With this, he admonished us not to become excellent theorists and experts in theology, but to repent through a Word of God and have our lives renewed and changed by God. This is the heritage of our spiritual forefathers in UBF and also of the reformers who first experienced the life renewal by a word of God themselves after they had admitted their complete defeat and despair against the power of sin before God. "Back to

the Bible" admonishes us what is really important in the life of faith and in the work of God: that we always return to him, to his word, to a word and listen to it with tears of repentance and with a God-fearing heart turned to him. Let us listen to the Word of God with desire, with lust and with the fear of God, let us repent from our hearts and lead a new and renewed life. May God thereby also work mightily in and through UBF in our time and fulfill his plan of salvation through the work of disciple making among the unbelieving students.

We were also allowed to experience a spiritual revival in our church, when God led unbelieving and disoriented, desperate and sinning lost students, one by one, to His word and repentance based on the word of God. Their testimonies of repentance also led other students to repentance. They kept coming to Jesus with their filthy sins until their shepherds admonished them not to concern themselves with themselves, but to thank Jesus and to obey Him practically. This penitential movement was the fruit of the life renewal and love for Jesus of M. Dr. Peter Chang, M. Stephanus Park, S. Peter Schweitzer, M. Dr. Petrus Chang and the spiritual cooperation of the missionaries, the local shepherds and the next generation. God uses the repentance and life renewal of one person in this dark time as a strong light for the conversion of countless more people who desperately seek the light in the darkness, especially in this dark time of crisis.

Let's look at verse 10: "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." After repentance, they should not continue to cry or be preoccupied with themselves. The day of atonement is a day of joy. Repentance is not shame or defeat or loss, but rather conversion to God is a reason for joy, confidence and new hope! Nehemiah therefore gave them orientation to thank God and to eat fatty food and sweet drinks. Nehemiah further said: "...send some to those who have nothing prepared". The joy of conversion is not a private matter. The whole of heaven celebrates and rejoices over every single person who repents. This is why Jesus said in Luke 15:7: "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." We

may and we should rejoice, together, with all our hearts, with everyone who repents and becomes a part of the body of Christ. Our whole new life in Christ is a life of great joy, as in a glorious victory and as at a wedding feast.

#### 4. Return to the hope of God (13-18)

Let's look at verses 13 and 14: "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." The leaders of Israel came to Ezra again the next day to hear the word of God from him even more. They found out that God had commanded that the Feast of Tabernacles be held. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, the people had taken the Promised Land. Through the Feast of Tabernacles, they were to remember each year how God had provided for them after the Exodus from Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. But since the time of Joshua, they had not held the Feast of Tabernacles for almost a thousand years. This shows that in the time of the visible blessing, they quickly forgot the invisible giver of blessing, God. Through Bible study, they now recognized their spiritual sin and decided to remember the history of God with His people, to dig deeper into God by celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. They allowed themselves to be taught and corrected by the Word of God.

Let us look at verses 15-17: "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." We learn from the Jews that they not only heard the word of God, but took it to heart, repented and obeyed it. Faith and repentance to Jesus al-

ways result in a change of life and without life renewal there is no faith and no repentance.

When the Israelites began to orient themselves according to the Word of God and take their place in the history of God, they rejoined the plan of God and returned to the hope of God. They thus also returned to their spiritual identity and calling as God's people. It is very important that we convert to God's hope for us. God did not create our lives without meaning and without a plan. He has a very concrete plan for each one of us in his history, he has redeemed us and has already prepared the works in which we can walk in our new life, glorifying it and taking a glorious place in his history (Ephesians 2:10). After the Israelites converted to God, they began to explore and discover God's hope for them as God's people and live accordingly. Let us convert to God by finding His hope and plan for us and take our place in His history and do the works He has prepared for us in His sovereignty and love. Let us prepare the upcoming Spring Bible Conference from the heart through deep Bible study and cooperation and renew and confess our spiritual identity.

God invites us today to return to the Bible. He wants to renew us spiritually and work mightily in us and around us. We must be ready to listen and obey the Word of God with devotion and fear of God to begin a new life. Moreover, through Ezra and Nehemiah we are greatly encouraged to faithfully fulfill the mission of teaching the Word of God and proclaiming God's vision and hope, and to prepare the spiritual environment for God's work.

God poured out the spirit of repentance and insight and was able to use Ezra and the Levites whom he had prepared as Bible teachers. Through spiritual cooperation and faithful preparation of the environment in the time of darkness, God's work of renewal can also be prepared in our time. May God establish spiritual leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah also in our generation and use them in his work of spiritual renewal and outpouring of his Spirit. Let us pray that Germany and Europe will return to God's hope and spiritual identity, to be a mighty army of God according to Ezekiel 37:10, a royal priesthood according to 1 Peter 2:9, a missionary sending continent, for the Muslim countries and the whole world.