

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: March 8, 2015

Effective Bible Teaching

by Dan Trygg

“Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which Yahweh God of Israel had given. The king granted him all he requested, because the hand of Yahweh his God was upon him. ...For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of Yahweh, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel. [He was a] priest, a scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of Yahweh and His statutes to Israel.”
Ezra 7:6,10,11

“Then Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding, on the 1st day of the 7th month. ³ And he read from it... from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ...and the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. ⁸ And they read from the book, from the law of God, distinctly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. ¹⁸ ...And he read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days...”
Nehemiah 8:2,3,7,8,18

Nehemiah 8 records one of the most powerful, effective large group Bible studies in biblical history. The occasion was a gathering of the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon. The temple had been rebuilt, and, through Nehemiah's leadership, the people had recently succeeded in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah felt **it was time to summon all the Jews to renew their covenant with God.** What better time to do this than the Feast of Trumpets, which initiated the period of introspection and repentance that led up to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement? **The ten days from Trumpets and the Day of Atonement were known as the “days of awe”, a time for soul-searching, fasting, repentance, making amends and reconciling of broken relationships. *Nehemiah and Ezra used this time to direct the peoples' thoughts to the covenant of God, made with Israel at Mount Sinai, during the Exodus.*** Moses had written the background history of the Jewish people, the oppression in Egypt, the miraculous intervention of God to lead His people out of bondage, the institution of the covenant, and the story of their wilderness wandering. God chose them to be a people for *His* possession, set-apart from other nations to seek, honor and glorify Him by living by His commandments and ordinances. They were to be dedicated to Yahweh *alone*. They were to have or serve *no* other gods. They were to live lives of moral righteousness and ritual purity, following the moral teachings, dietary restrictions and laws of purification. Moses wrote about the construction of the Tabernacle, the appointment of the Aaronic priesthood, the choice to set apart the Levites as tabernacle transporters, the origin and importance of the tithe and temple tax. He wrote about the various sacrifices, and how the people were to approach their holy God. He recounted examples of faith and obedience, as well as the stories of unbelief and disobedience, and the horrific consequences caused by disregarding God's commandments. Moses even prophesied of the cycle of disobedience, discipline and judgment spiraling down and down, culminating in the exile from their land, ...as well as the hope and promise of their repentance and return to their ancestral land of promise. All of this was written by Moses and recorded in the five scrolls, the first five books of our Bible, known as “the Law”, the *Torah*.

The people gathered there that day were the descendants of those original “children of Israel” who had been brought out of Egypt, and had lived for generations in this land. Because their forefathers had disregarded God's covenant, His commandments, statutes and ordinances, ...had worshiped other gods, and followed the practices of the nations around them..., they had been expelled by God from the land. They had spent the previous 70 years in exile, and, now, *these* individuals, the descendants of those “children of Israel”, have been brought, once again, to this land of promise. **It is vital that they know and understand their history.** Already the same sins their forefathers had committed were surfacing in their midst. Those, like Ezra and Nehemiah, who knew their Holy God, knew that this would not be tolerated. It would bring the same judgments upon them as before. **It was critical that everyone should be called together to learn the story of their past, and who this God is, who had been so gracious to them to bring them back to the land of their fathers, but who also would “not leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex. 34:7), should they continue in sin. This was not just a matter of personal faith or individual religious preference; it was a matter of survival for their nation!** (Just as it is for *ours*, today!!)

Because all of this background was written by Moses in the Pentateuch (the first five books in our Bibles), Ezra and Nehemiah instituted one the largest, longest, most pervasive Bible study efforts in history. All the people of the land were called together at Jerusalem, at that time largely unpopulated. Men, women and children who were old enough to understand participated in a group Bible study that lasted from early morning until noon, every day for seven days! This was a *saturation* effort, an attempt to get everyone on the same page, so they could *intelligently* renew the covenant with God, and would understand what that meant.

It is important to remember that this was a time where there was no sound amplification, nor printing presses. **How would they reach all of these people?** There were only a few thousand present, but **how could they effectively cover all this history, and not lose everyone along the way?** Let's take a look at what they did.

First, Nehemiah recruited Ezra to head up this effort. Nehemiah was a brilliant strategist and leader, but he would probably *not* have drawn a crowd to hear *his* teachings on the *Torah*. It was not his area of expertise, nor did he have the extensive qualifications or notoriety that Ezra had. **Ezra had devoted his life to the study of the Law of Moses.** He was both a priest and a scribe, as well as being acknowledged as an expert by his colleagues, *and even by the Persian king!* Not only was he a *scholar*, but *he walked* what it was *he taught*. **It had been his clear purpose to study, to implement, and then to teach the law of God.** In Hebrew, the word for “teacher” is an intensive form of the word for “learner”. How could someone teach with any credibility, if he was not living it out in his own life? Further, **Ezra had a reputation of having God's ear, ...he got what he prayed for.** He had favor with God, because he was so committed to God's word, and walking in His ways. So, when it was announced that Ezra was going to teach a series of meetings on the *Torah* of Moses, everyone knew it was going to be an amazing, inspiring event.

Second, they chose to hold these studies during the time when people would *already* be in Jerusalem for the “days of awe”. They were already freed up from other responsibilities, and they were in a mindset to seek God.

Third, the people were *attentive*. Nehemiah and Ezra had successfully communicated the need, and the opportunity, so that people looked forward to the teaching. They were of a mind to learn, and there was a heart to understand. It is difficult to teach an unruly, inattentive group. Interested students, however, inspire good teaching.

Fourth, they built a high platform, with a podium, for Ezra. This was so that he could be *clearly seen* and *heard* above the crowd. There were also 13 other men on this platform. We do not know their function, but clearly their visible presence was a show of support for Ezra, and possibly they also helped in the reading.

Fifth, Ezra had recruited Levites to be scattered among the people to clearly explain, translate or give the meaning to what was being read. *It is not enough to simply read the Scripture. It must be carefully and accurately interpreted, clearly explained and appropriate application must be made to everyday life.* As Levites, these were men who were also dedicated to the study of the *Torah*. Ezra chose men who would faithfully present the truth.

Sixth, it appears that people were divided into groups. The phrase, “the people remained in their place” seems to indicate that the people were gathered into smaller groups or stations for hearing and instruction. This allowed for questions, discussion and more personalized instruction.

Seventh, Ezra began the meeting with prayer, blessing God and expressing their yieldedness to Him.

Eighth, those who read were careful to do so *distinctly*, with *clear enunciation*, so people could understand.

Ninth, when the portion of scripture was read, the Levites would interpret or “give the sense” of the passage, so that the people understood. The immediate explanation *clarified* and *cemented* the scripture.

Tenth, they encouraged the people to *respond* to what they heard. The first day, it was celebration and sharing. On the second day, when they read about keeping the Feast of Booths, they encouraged the people to collect branches and construct booths as a reminder of the wilderness wandering. It was almost two weeks earlier than the prescribed time for the Feast of Booths, but, because the people had just heard the story, it was more meaningful. As a result, their participation was more complete, greater than it had been since the time of Joshua (Neh. 8:17).

After the seven days of study, there was a solemn assembly (Lev. 23:36). The ninth day was a day spent in reconciling and making amends. The 10th day was the Day of Atonement, a 25 hour fast and intense prayer for the forgiveness of sin, the most solemn day of the year. It was the most important of the three major feast days, when the high priest would enter into the holy of holies to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, to see if God would accept their sacrifices and cover their sin. Then, from the 15th through the 22nd was supposed to be the Feast of Booths, to remember their wilderness wandering, again. On the 24th, the people came together yet *again*, in fasting and sackcloth. **They listened to the scriptures being read, for one quarter of the day, and then they confessed their sin and worshiped God for one quarter of the day.** Then, **several of the Levites led in a very long prayer (The longest prayer in the Bible!), rehearsing *once again* the history of their nation, and the persistence of their unfaithfulness.** *Their prayer of confession turned into a declaration of commitment to renew the covenant with God.* They witnessed their intent by a *sealed* document *already signed* by the Levites and priests, Nehemiah the governor, and other leaders. With this challenging example before them, **the person leading in prayer led *everyone who was willing, to join with their leaders in a commitment to various specific reforms,*** which he listed out, one by one. The people joined in taking on an *oath* to pursue obedience, and a *curse* for disobedience. **The fruit of the intensive Bible study and solemn soul-searching and prayer was a new commitment on the part of the people,** a willingness to put away sin and a new commitment to serving God. ***We, too, desperately need an intensive read-through of the Bible. We, too, need to rediscover the God of the Bible, be moved to soul-examination, repentance and fresh commitment to Him.***