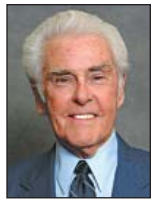


# Return to God's word

It may seem strange to you that the name Ezra suddenly appears in our text dealing with the reading of the Scripture in Jerusalem. What



**John Howell**

we probably don't know is that Ezra and Nehemiah were actually one book in the ancient Hebrew and Greek Old Testaments. Each of the books contains material also found in the other. Ezra was a priest and a scribe whose ancestry goes all the way back to Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). "He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord was upon him" (Ezra 7:6).

He was chosen to read the law of God as described in our text from Nehemiah 8:1-8 for "he had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). What is his challenge for us today?

**Be attentive to God's word (Nehemiah. 8:1-4).** My longtime friend Dr. H.I. Hester, who passed away several years ago, wrote a brief volume entitled "The Book of Books" for a church-based introduction to the Bible. He rightly declared, "There can be but one reason for the widespread distribution and use of the Bible. It is because of what the Bible is. It is the word of God. It answers the need of every heart. It is the word of life. It stimulates the mind, feeds the soul, and satisfies the heart as not other book can" (p. 1).

When Nehemiah stood on a platform or pulpit built for him, he was above the people and his text was the Book of the Law that had been given to Moses to guide the people in their commitment

to God as they moved from Egypt to Canaan. He "read it aloud from daybreak till noon...and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law" (Neh. 1:3).

**Respond to God's word with worship and obedience (Nehemiah 8:5-6).** The Israelites immediately stood up when Ezra read from the Law. What was the purpose of this great assembly in Jerusalem? A basic reason for Ezra to read to all the people was because most of the people could not read even if they had access to the text of the Law. But it was important that they hear the authoritative Word of the Law as they were settling into their new relationships with God.

Hearing the Word was only part of their responsibility. The reading of the Word was used to stimulate a great revival in worship that would express itself in obedience to the teaching of the law. Confession, repentance and obedience were aspects of the biblical renewal they were experiencing.

Similar attitudes of worship and obedience are taught by Paul in Colossians. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (3:16).

Obedience to the Word of God is one evidence of worship. Christians are used to hearing about obedience but too often have not demonstrated it in practice. Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, became very concerned about the failure of responsibility for obedience to the word.

In his biographical writings, he declared, "I know of many churches that have Bible study groups. People will come together for years to study the Bible, but nothing ever comes of it. That is to say, the study is only for the sake of the study itself, with some

## Bible Studies for Life

August 9, 2015

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-8

fellowship thrown in." But he points out that this is an insufficient use of Bible study for Christian action.

"To me," he said, "studying with no plan of action is like cooking great meals week after week and dumping the prepared food directly into the garbage" ("Building Materials for Life," p. 39). The objective of Bible study is to help us learn God's will for showing practical love to a neighbor.

Authentic worship is also important to Fuller. Since God is spirit, we must worship in spirit and, the Bible admonishes, also in truth. He believes public worship is essential to Christian growth but he fears sometimes that public worship is an impediment to true worship since so few people really "reflect on God and His awesome presence" as they gather into the churches. Assembling together is to "worship, to reflect on God, to listen to a message and be strengthened, to be light, salt and leaven to the world" (p. 47).

**Study God's word to ensure your full understanding (Nehemiah 8:7-8).** Ezra was not content to have only listeners to his reading of the Law even though listening is essential to learning. The Levites who served with Ezra divided the people into small groups and taught them in those groups.

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. Education and worship are closely related so Ezra wanted the people to have each. So do we in our churches today.

*John Howell is academic dean emeritus at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.*