

There is a Time

Nehemiah 8:7-12

Nehemiah 8:7-12 - *“Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. ⁸ So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep.” For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.*

¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” ¹¹ So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.”

Background Notes

Many of the Jewish people had returned to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon. They rebuilt the Temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar back in 586BC. Under Nehemiah's leadership, they rebuilt the city wall. A great time of blessing and revival followed!

In our previous Talk on Nehemiah 8 we learned that that the revival was **centered about the Word of God**. The revival came about not only because the Bible was read, but also that the Bible was **taught and explained** (v7-8).

This time period is when the “Targums” - Aramaic paraphrases or translations of the Old Testament - began. When the Jewish people were living in exile in Babylon, they picked up the language of Babylon, which was Aramaic. So when they returned to Judah after 70 years in Babylonian captivity, the people spoke Aramaic.

But the Scriptures were written in Hebrew – so when Ezra was reading the Scriptures to the people, he was reading the Word of God in Hebrew. The people would have understood some of the words, but some would need to be translated. So here we find the Hebrew translated into Aramaic by Ezra, and then explained so the people could understand what they were hearing.

By the way, we have ancient copies of the Targums. For authenticity studies of the Old Testament, it's very helpful to be able to compare the original Hebrew with the Aramaic translation and the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament).

One more background note. Why were the people weeping? And why did Ezra tell them to stop weeping, and start rejoicing? They were weeping because they realized they were guilty when they heard the Word of the Lord read and translated and explained. They realized that they had fallen far short of God's righteous standards – and thus they began to weep.

If you want to know how the people of Jerusalem had fallen short of God's standards, read the book of Ezra. We read there that the people had departed from the commands of the Lord. There was divorce, intermarrying with the pagans, and much more. So as Ezra read the Scriptures to the people, they were convicted of their sinful condition.

Ezra told them to stop weeping and rejoice, because that day was a holiday. If you go back to verse 2, you'll see that it was the first day of the seventh month. That is Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Hebrew civil year. It is also the Feast of Trumpets – a day that was holy to the Lord, and it was to be a day of rejoicing! So there is a time and place to weep – but, said Ezra, today is a day of rejoicing!

Doctrinal Points

1. There is a time for weeping and a time for rejoicing.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 says that there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh. There is a time to mourn, and a time to dance. The hearts of the people of Jerusalem were in the right place. When they wept, they weren't doing something wrong. They were right to weep because they recognized they had sinned. But Ezra told them that today is the time to laugh.

That should characterize us as well. When we recognize that there is sin in our lives, we should weep. But we shouldn't continue to weep. We should realize our sinful condition, repent and confess our sins, and then go on our way rejoicing in what the Lord has done for us!

This should also be true in the church. There is a time for weeping when there is sin in the congregation - but let's not only weep, and let's not continue to weep! Let's deal with the sin. There may have to be discipline, but then we move on in forgiveness and rejoicing.

There is a time to rejoice. Some churches never get it right. They're dead two ways: they don't weep when they sin, and they don't rejoice when they should be rejoicing.

2. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

Where is the source of our strength? Our strength is the joy of the Lord! In Christian service and in Christian living in general, you can't go on in your own strength. Yes, it's true that you can leg it out for a certain amount of time in your own power and strength, but eventually you will burn out.

Many Christians have burned out because they've tried to serve the Lord or live a Christian life in their own strength. The joy of the Lord is your strength! The joy of the Lord will keep you going. As you rejoice in the Lord, you will find strength.

In my own life, when I sense the joy of the Lord, there is a tremendous amount of motivation - a source of strength. I find almost a direct parallel between gaining strength from living in the joy of the Lord, or lack of strength from living in discouragement. The joy of the Lord is your strength!

3. The Word is effective when it is understood.

In this chapter we see the Word of God becoming very effective in the people's lives - they were weeping. But that didn't happen just because they heard the Word read to them. The Word was effective because it was translated and explained so that they **understood** it. This chapter is stressing the point that **the Word of God will be effective when it is understood**.

Practical Application

For the Bible to be effective in your life you must do more than read it – you must understand it.

How well do you understand the Bible?

The Bible is not to be used as a "good luck charm." Some Christians carry a little Bible in their pocket, thinking that as long as they have their Bible with them they'll be safe, and things are will go well that day. The Bible is never to be used like that - and it never will be understood if it is used like that.

And the Bible is not to be read just to make us feel good. Some people like to read particular translations or simple Bible passages because it makes them "feel good." You can have your favorite translation or Scriptures - that's fine - but if you're reading just to get good feelings, it won't be as effective in your life. You've got to understand the Word. If you don't understand what the Bible is saying, and just "feel good" when you read it, that doesn't carry much weight.

And we shouldn't pull Scripture verses out of their proper context! We're more likely to do that when we get into the habit of simply opening the Bible and starting to read where you open it – or pointing your finger randomly at a "verse for the

moment.” If you do this, you run a great risk of misinterpreting and misapplying Scripture by taking it out of its surrounding context!

A few years ago I heard about a Christian woman who was single, and wanted to be married. God hadn't sent along her "Prince Charming." She was discouraged, but one day she opened her Bible at random and happened to place her finger on Zechariah 9:9. She was excited because she thought God given her a promise: Zechariah 9:9 - *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you...”* Surely, she thought, that verse means the right man is going to be coming along shortly!

What's wrong with opening the Bible at random and choosing a verse? What's wrong with using the Bible that way? It can be dangerous, because the Bible is meant to be read in chapters and books, not in single verses. If we grab out a verse at random, and we don't read the context of that verse, we can get all kinds of incorrect interpretations and ideas!

Zechariah 9:9 has nothing to do with a prospective husband! That verse is a Messianic prophecy – a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah! The young woman couldn't assume that it applied to her. When the verse was explained to her, she was disappointed, but she learned a good lesson. Of course that's an extreme example, but we all have to be careful not to use the Bible like that, and pull verses it out of their context.

The Bible becomes effective in your life when you don't just read it – it becomes effective when you both **read it and understand it!**

I would suggest that you get a number of translations so that you can better understand what the Bible is saying. Get a Bible with study notes – notes that explain difficult verses are very helpful. Begin to study the Bible in books – that's the way God gave it. Get some good commentaries, or study with online commentaries.

Remember, God wants us not only to read His Word - He wants us to understand it. When we understand it, we'll be able to apply it properly, and then it will become effective in our lives.