

Life: Return to God's Word

July 23, 2015

- *The Bible Studies for Life lesson for August 9 focuses on Nehemiah 8:1-8.*

Most mornings, I listen to the [Daily Audio Bible](#) podcast. Every day, Brian Hardin reads a portion of the Old and New Testaments, Psalms and Proverbs. He reads the entire Bible through every year, offering a brief commentary or prayer at the end of each podcast. I've been listening to Daily Audio Bible four years, and now when I miss a morning of listening to Scripture, my day seems incomplete. For me, listening to God's word every morning centers me spiritually and prepares me for the tasks ahead.

The exiled Israelites returning to Jerusalem needed God's word to prepare them for the re-establishment of their nation. Led by Nehemiah, their first task was to rebuild the city wall. Persevering through tremendous conflict and ridicule, they completed the wall in only 52 days. After that, Nehemiah organized the allocation of the dwelling places back to the returning exiles based on genealogical records. They resettled their towns and then looked forward to rebuilding their culture.

Priority of God's word

Ezra, the priest, knew that leading the people to return to the priority of God's word in their lives was essential to the Israelites' identity as God's chosen ones. All the people gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate to hear the law of Moses read. Ezra and his fellow priests were elevated above the people on a wooden platform especially built for the occasion. The people stood and heard the Scripture read from daybreak until noon.

As the priests read aloud the Mosaic law, the people were reminded of the covenant God established with them, beginning with their ancient

forefather, Abraham. They heard about the sons of the patriarch Jacob, whose offspring became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. They were reminded how God rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and cared for them during their wanderings in the Sinai desert. They heard the priests recite the commandments God gave to his people in that desert, along with the promise he would bless them if they obeyed them.

Making it plain

Ezra and the other priests were careful to explain the Scripture, “making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (Nehemiah 8:8). God’s Spirit convicted the Israelites of their failure to love God and place no other gods before him. They realized they not only left their homeland when they were exiled to Babylon, but also many of them left their devotion to God behind. The people raised their hands and shouted, “Amen!” in response. Then, they bowed their heads to the ground to demonstrate their submission to God.

I have a vivid memory of the first time the Bible really came alive to me. When I was a teenager, our pastor taught a Bible study on Proverbs to our youth group. He used the Living Bible paraphrase, and it was the first time I heard the Bible without struggling to understand archaic words that were not part of my vocabulary. The Bible truly became “alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword” to me during that weeklong study, and it instigated for me a lifetime of reading, listening and studying the Scripture (Hebrews 4:12).

According to christianbook.com, the New International Version of the Bible requires a seventh- to eighth-grade reading level for understanding. In Texas, where a significant number of people are functionally illiterate, [about 30 percent of the population](#) cannot read the NIV translation with complete understanding. Fortunately, several good translations of Scripture are geared for reading levels as low as third grade. Pastors and

Bible study leaders, just like the Levite priests, can open up God's word to all the people in their congregations or small groups by explaining the Scripture and introducing people to translations they can more easily understand.

God's word is just as powerful today as it was when the priests read the law of Moses to the returning Jewish exiles. When believers return to God's word and respond to it as the Holy Spirit leads them, they will be used by God to bring reconciliation and healing to their families, neighbors and communities.