

## GET AN UNDERSTANDING

Nehemiah 8:1-18

In his poem *Andrea del Sarto* Robert Browning included this question “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, Or what’s a heaven for?” While we will not attempt to answer his very profound question about heaven, we might well consider the implications of a person’s reach exceeding his grasp. In the context of “understanding,” all of us could agree that we know a lot more than we understand. With the explosion of information that is happening in our time, the gap between what we know and what we understand is growing all the time.

While we can certainly benefit from knowing about many things, we are not able to get the most value from such knowledge without an understanding of who, what, when, where, why and how. While it would be impossible to fully understand everything relevant to all that we know about, there are certain areas of life where a better understanding is crucially important. In many of these critical areas, we have opted to “leave it to the experts” to advise us and we rely (sometimes blindly) on what they tell us. As you can well imagine or have experienced in your own life, such personal lack of understanding can have dire consequences.

Since we cannot understand everything about all we know about, then we should prioritize the needs and our responses toward meeting those needs. If a person were to come into a typical Sunday School room and see the list of prayer requests on the dry-erase board, what would be the conclusion of the top priority of unmet needs? You might think that health concerns would be the most important issues with which we have to deal. Some of these are literally life and death issues. That would make them important!

I don’t think we could say that all of such health issues were caused by a lack of understanding of what we do, what we eat, what we are exposed to, the medicines we take, and our attitude and outlook on life. I do think, however, that we would all agree that a better understanding and carrying out good practices in these various areas could have had a positive effect on the current conditions of the people on that list.

Another broad area that will typically wind up on such a list of concerns is related to our finances. How important is it to have a job? Do you think that having an understanding of what it takes to get a job and to hold on to a job would be important? How important are having a good education and subsequent training to such questions? What about understanding the importance of showing responsibility, being honest, making good choices, etc. and how these influence such things as our finances?

What could be more important than health and finances? Think about the major political issues of our day. The so-called Affordable Care Act and the level of unemployment are two of the biggest issues. Another high profile issue is related to control of our borders and the influx of illegal immigrants. Ironically, the influx of illegal immigrants has a significant influence on the cost of health care and on the level of employment. Both of these major issues are actually temporary concerns. What about long-term or eternal concerns?

When we move into the realm of our relationship with God, we find many different ideas about what people say they know and varying degrees of concern about “how important spiritual or eternal issues really are.” We are in the middle of a war for the soul of our nation and it centers around the importance of spiritual and eternal values. In 1963 Bible reading was banned from public schools, in 1973, abortion of unborn children was legalized, and in 2008 several states legalized same-gender unions and marriages. Pending rulings from the Supreme Court will decide if same-gender marriages will become the “law of the land.” How is the war coming

along? Could we conclude that we could all benefit from having a better understanding of the consequences of such decisions?

In the eighth chapter of Nehemiah we find an emphasis on understanding beyond just knowing what the word of God says. The people of that day had undergone a number of events that had traumatized them and their previous generations. This was in the year 444 BC and there was a lot of uncertainty in their lives. Many of their parents and even grandparents had returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel more than one hundred years ago. The temple was rebuilt and an attempt made to restore the religious practices that made Israel distinct as a nation. There was not a lot of progress made. Thirteen years before in the year 457 BC, Ezra had led a group of people with leadership ability back to Judah for the purpose of teaching the people what the word of God said. Ezra had some successes and instituted some reforms but, again, progress was limited.

Nehemiah had just come to Jerusalem and he was able to inspire the people to work with him to rebuild the wall of the city and to get on with the needed restoration of the nation. When the rebuilding of the wall had been completed and Nehemiah had addressed some of the social justice concerns using the principles of the law of Moses and had brought some organization to the way the nation was operating, the attention of the people turned to concerns about their spiritual heritage. Apparently, the effort initiated by Ezra over the past several years to teach the Torah had caused the people to realize that they needed to know more.

#### Desire the Word – 8:1-3

<sup>1</sup>And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. <sup>2</sup>Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who *could* listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup>He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate 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. Nehemiah 8:1-3 (NASB95)

Can you believe that less than a hundred years ago a president of the U.S. made the following statement? “America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.” That statement is attributed to Woodrow Wilson who was definitely NOT a staunch conservative. At one time we had a sense of destiny that our nation had a purpose that was closely tied to God’s will. It doesn’t take more than a casual observation to realize that we have lost or forgotten our purpose.

Israel definitely had a calling or purpose in God’s plan of salvation and their realization of that purpose sparked a renewed interest in how they might fulfill what God expected of them. The starting point was to turn to the Word of God. Some think that this call to learn what God had entrusted to their nation in the Scriptures was initiated by Nehemiah. It could have been spontaneous in that the time that the people came together was around the religious observances associated with the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The time for observing these was at the Jewish New Year or the beginning of the month of Tishri which would correspond to a September-October time frame in our calendar. To confuse matters, the first month of the Jewish calendar is Nisan which is in the spring time around the March-April time frame. Probably the closest comparison we have is a calendar-year versus a fiscal-year distinction.

As it turned out, the year that had just ended was a “Sabbath” year which the Law of Moses called for a time of rest for the land in which no crops were to be planted. With the famine that had happened, there was not much produced during that year of 444 BC. You may

recall, that it was the neglect of the Sabbath years that was related to the seventy years of exile that had happened almost two centuries before this time. That information may have sparked some interest in knowing what the word of God actually said.

Additionally, Moses had instructed the people (Deut 30:10-11) as follows:

And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, when all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

According to the teachings of Moses, this was the right time to get a refresher course in what the word taught the people.

We can see the great respect the people had for Ezra in that he was requested to read the word to them. Of course, he was well qualified to do that being a priest and a scribe. Everyone who was old enough to understand the words of the scripture showed up to participate in this solemn event. They got started early (probably at daybreak) and finished up around noon.

Warren Wiersbe (in his book *Be Determined*) saw significance in the mention of the reading taking place near the Watergate and noted the following: “In the Bible, water for washing is a picture of the Word of God (John 15:3; Eph. 5:26), while water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God (John 7:37–39). When we apply the water of the Word to our lives, then the Spirit can work and bring the help we need. It is refreshing to the soul when you receive the Word and allow the Spirit to teach you.”

#### Prepare to Hear – 8:4-8

<sup>4</sup>Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. <sup>5</sup>Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. <sup>6</sup>Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with *their* faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup>Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people *remained* in their place. <sup>8</sup>They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. Nehemiah 8:4-8 (NASB95)

As important as the rebuilding of the wall was to the physical security of Jerusalem, the reestablishment of the expectations of God for the nation and for individuals was even more important. Before they could build the wall around Jerusalem, they had to clean up the debris that was in the way. These folks needed to build a moral and spiritual wall for themselves, but first, they needed to clean up the building site by getting rid of the immoral and pagan influences and practices in their lives.

How were they going to do that? It would be almost impossible for most of us to build a new house and have everything work out the way it should without a set of plans or blueprints for the job. These folks needed a blueprint for living and they found that in the Word of God.

We are given a list of thirteen people who stood with Ezra on the platform as he led the people during this solemn occasion. This was likely a show of unity of those in positions of leadership among the Jews. The account also mentions an additional thirteen Levites who were distributed among those who had come to hear the reading of the word of God.

In that culture, the names of people had meanings that were related (in many cases) to their religion. An analysis of the names of those on the platform shows a strong connection to the foundational truths (platform) of the Scriptures. A similar analysis of the names of the Levites who were among the people shows a relationship to the impact that the truths of the word of God should have on our lives. (This analysis can be found in the attachment “What’s in a

Name” following these comments on chapter eight.)

The reading of the Scriptures was preceded by a time of worship. The people had come there in anticipation of hearing the word of the Lord and they were ready. When Ezra began his introductory remarks of praising God, the people joined right in and participated in worship by bowing down to the ground.

There were priests and Levites in the crowd to provide interpretation of what the law said to the people. Warren Wiersbe noted in his comment on Nehemiah in *Be Determined*, “The Bible is not a “magic book” that changes people or circumstances because somebody reads it or recites it. *God’s Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life-changing power.* Note that six times in this chapter you can find understanding mentioned.” The language of Babylon was Aramaic and was in common usage through that general area. The reading of the law that Ezra gave was likely in Hebrew. In addition to understanding the “significance” of the “law,” the people likely needed help in just understanding the words that were being used.

This format of coming together to hear a message regarding our relationship to God, starting with a time of praise and worship, followed by reading the Scripture and then providing the interpretation or application to everyday life, and concluding with a call to action is one that we still use today.

#### Move Beyond Listening – 8:9-12

<sup>9</sup>Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and 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 or weep.” For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” <sup>11</sup>So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” <sup>12</sup>All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them. Nehemiah 8:9-12 (NASB95)

The reading of the word brought conviction and the people were deeply troubled by what they heard in the law as compared to what they saw in their own lives. They just did not measure up to what they heard. This was the beginning of a revival among the people of Judah. As was mentioned in verse five, when the Book of the Law was opened the people stood up in reverence to the sacredness of the Scriptures and perhaps as an indication of their eagerness to hear its message. That was certainly a good beginning and as we see in these latter verses, understanding the message of the word brought strong conviction and a sense of remorse for not having learned about this earlier in their lives. That kind of remorse leads to genuine repentance and transformation which are good reasons for rejoicing.

The timing of the revival was such that it meshed with one of the high and holy celebrations. For this reason the people were to be in a celebration mood. The word of God not only brings conviction, it also gives us hope.

#### Rituals and Understanding Our Roots – 8:13-18

<sup>13</sup>Then on the second day the heads of fathers’ households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. <sup>14</sup>They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. <sup>15</sup>So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.” <sup>16</sup>So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. <sup>17</sup>The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity

made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. <sup>18</sup> 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, and on the eighth day *there was* a solemn assembly according to the ordinance. Nehemiah 8:13-18 (NASB95)

Enthusiasm regarding the word of God is not enough. What is needed is the willingness to do what the law says we should. As soon as they discovered that they were at the time of year for the feast of Tabernacles, they turned to the Word of God and found the passage that told how this festival was to be celebrated, and then they went about doing what was necessary to observe this celebration. The people went out and found branches and built little booths and sat under these. Just doing what the Lord has asked us to do gives a sense of joy and well-being. The people were glad even though they had started with remorse.

Just going through the motions of the ritual observance of the Feast of Tabernacles would have given them a better understanding and appreciation of all that God had done for their nation during the “wilderness” experience. It would have also given them a sense of the rich heritage they had as the people of God and a better understanding of the love and grace of God that had brought them to this point in the life of their nation.

The words of the second verse of Amazing Grace start out with “‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved...” In the case of the Jews, the instrument of God's grace was His word. It brought the conviction (fear) and then it brought a sense of gladness and joy in response to obedience to that word. It still works that way today.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Many of us have read passages in the Old Testament and have struggled with the strange sounding names of the people of that day. Some of us have asked the question of why are all these names listed and why do I need to know this. In the book of Nehemiah, there are several places where lists of names are presented. Sometimes we see such a list and think that it was included “just for the record” as in the listing given in chapter seven of the various families that had returned from Babylon. Then, as we begin to read chapter eight we see a list of various people (thirteen in all) who were on the platform with Ezra when he read the Book of the Law to the people after the wall around Jerusalem had been completed. A few verses later, we find mentioned thirteen more who were scattered among the people for the purpose of helping them understand what they were hearing.

We've all heard the claim that God always has a purpose for whatever He does and since we know that He inspired the Scripture, we might raise a question regarding any significance that we should look for in these lists of names. Another factor to take into account is that the name of a person usually has some meaning associated with it.

In the following paragraphs, the names of the individuals on the platform with Ezra and those who were among the people are shown along with the meaning of their names. If we start to look for a “message” associated with this group of twenty-six people, we can put together a fairly comprehensive summary of God's dealing with Israel and the church of Lord Jesus.

### Mattithiah – gift of Jehovah

The fact that these people were being restored to their ancestral land rather than just passing into the oblivion of history as so many other nations have done, was evidence of the grace (gift) of God. The fact that this name was first in the list should remind us that the Gifts and Grace of God are the starting points in our relationship with Him.

### Shema – hear

Just as in the initial days of the development of their nation, Moses had instructed them to hear the word of God (Deuteronomy 6), the restoration would start with the people harkening to God's word.

### Anaiah – Jehovah has answered

Many of them were likely wondering if the restoration was going to be successful. It had been about one hundred years since the first group had returned from Babylon and little progress had been made. When God sent Ezra and Nehemiah to them, He answered in the affirmative as the restoration began.

### Uriah – Jehovah is my light

Understanding the word of God would be the light they needed to be able to recognize the true Light of the world who would come in the Person of the Messiah. It is also significant that we need God's light to understand His word to us. “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.” (Psalms 36:9)

### Hilkiah – Jehovah is my portion

They needed to realize that all they were and all they could ever hope to be were to be found in

following God and being in His will. Their inheritance was not in the world or of the world, but it was in God alone.

#### Maaseiah – work of Jehovah

The nation they had been during the glory days of David and Solomon was the result of the work God had done in their midst. This is the same message that applies to us as Christian as stated by Paul in Ephesians 2:10 – “for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.”

#### Pedaiah – Jehovah has ransomed

Being ransomed or bought back speaks of the saving work of God that was clearly evident in the descendant of Israel being delivered from slavery in Egypt and captivity in Babylon and points toward the redemption of all humanity from their slavery to sin that Christ accomplished in dying for us on the Cross.

#### Mishael – who God is

This salvation was not because of any worthiness on their (Israel’s) part or our (the Church’s) part but was initiated by God and points to His very nature or “Who He Is.”

#### Malchijah – Jehovah is my king

As a result of that salvation we are able to come out of the “kingdom of darkness” and come into the “kingdom of light” where we can willingly recognize that God is king and Jesus is Lord of our lives.

#### Hashum – rich

As we experience all that God has for us as His children we come to realize that our Father has riches in all things and He holds the wealth of the world in His hands. He is all we need and provides all we need in the physical realm as well as the spiritual realm.

#### Hashbaddanah – considerate judge

Jehovah is a God of Justice, but that justice is tempered by His grace and mercy. We should rejoice in the fact that in His compassion, He makes provision for us to experience forgiveness through confession and repentance.

#### Zechariah – Jehovah remembers

We take comfort in knowing that God remembers our faithfulness and does not remember our sinfulness when we repent and seek His forgiveness.

#### Meshullam – friend

The relationship that God has with the world starts with His greatness as the Creator of all the universe, it is expressed in His roles as Savior and all the world will know that He is the Judge of all. The relationship that Adam enjoyed prior to the fall and the relationship that Jesus mentioned to His disciples before His death was that of being our friend. That relationship speaks of a closeness and intimacy that are driven by a genuine appreciation and caring for each other that is not motivated by fear, personal ambition, or reward but is simply related to love.

The above descriptions seem to be related to the foundational truths we find in God's word. The next set of names and their description seems to be more related to the impact it has on us as we appropriate these truths into our lives.

#### Jeshua – Jehovah is salvation

How appropriate to begin this list with someone who shared the same Hebrew name as was given to the Messiah. He literally came and dwelt among the people and by His life and His words He caused us to understand the word of God.

#### Bani – built or build up

The rebuilding of the nation in preparation for the coming of the Messiah was the immediate application that could be attributed to this name. It also can be associated with the work of the ministry of those in places of leadership in the Church which is for the "building up of the Body of Christ" as mentioned in Ephesians 4:12. It could also relate to the admonition of Jude to "build yourself up on your most holy faith" in his letter to the church.

#### Sherebiah – Jehovah has scorched

God's judgment that had already happened to the nation was like a scorching sun and wind that had brought them to the point of being in need of and ready for restoration.

#### Jamin – right hand

When His work of salvation was completed, then the Messiah would take His place at the right hand of God. Since we are seated with Christ Jesus in the heaven, then this is our position also.

#### Akkub – same as Jacob – take by the heel

The Messiah would come from the descendants of one who was a deceiver and a schemer whose life had been transformed by the way God dealt with him. This experience points toward the promise that we have described in 1 Thess 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things are passed away, behold all things have become new." Those who are born again of the Spirit of God should be as radically different from who they were in the past as was Israel was different from Jacob.

#### Shabbethai – sabbatical

God used three sabbatical seasons or 21 years to prepare Jacob for a transformation from being self-sufficient and surviving by his own wits to become a person whose name literally means "God prevails." The Sabbath was also used to describe the situation or rest that God wanted for His people as a result of the salvation they would find in Christ.

#### Hodiah – Jehovah is my majesty

After that encounter at the Brook Jabok, the one who had been a deceiver saw God as the ruler in his life rather than his own selfishness and personal ambition being the driving forces.

#### Maaseiah – work of Jehovah

This transformation was a result of God working in the life of Jacob and the subsequent struggle that Jacob had with God. This encounter is a type of the struggle each person has in coming to the point of surrendering to Christ.



Kelita – Crippled

That struggle or wrestling with God resulted in the natural strength of Jacob being broken so that he realized his need to rely on God. This could also be a reference to the death of self that is associated with our “taking up our cross daily.”

Azariah – Jehovah has helped

God did help Israel immediately in his encounter with his estranged brother Esau and cared for the family of Israel in such a way that they became all that God had promised.

Jozabad – Jehovah has endowed

God provided all that they needed and continued to bless them. This could also point to the Gift of the Spirit with which God has endowed the church for the work of the ministry to which He as called us.

Hanan – he is merciful

These blessings repeatedly came to them in spite of their failures because God is merciful.

Pelaiah – Jehovah does wonders

Just as their ancestors had experienced God’s miracles, He was working to restore the nation even in the time in which they lived. In the time leading up to the birth of the Messiah and in the subsequent years of His ministry on earth and then in the ministry of the church God continues to work wonders to accomplish His will and purpose.