

The Reading of *the* Word



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 8:1–8, Deut. 31:9–13, Matt. 17:5, Acts 8:26–38, Neh. 8:9–12, Lev. 23:39–43.*

Memory Text: “So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading” (*Nehemiah 8:8, NKJV*).

The Jerusalem wall was finished. With the placement of the gates, the Israelites, under the leadership of Nehemiah, had thus completed the main task. When the wall was completed, the surrounding nations were in awe and recognized that this “was done by . . . God” (*Neh. 6:16, NKJV*). The enemies realized that the God of Israel was real because, despite the incredible opposition and hatred the Israelites experienced, they still had completed the work they had set out to do.

Following the completion of the wall, Nehemiah appointed a governor of Jerusalem (his brother Hanani) and a leader of the citadel (Hananiah). Both men were chosen based on integrity, trustworthiness, and reverence for God (*Neh. 7:2*), rather than on genealogy. The wall was completed during the month of Elul (sixth month [*Neh. 6:15*]).

What was to be the next order of business? The following chapters of *Nehemiah (8–10)* describe an important series of events in the month of Tishri, the seventh month (*Neh. 8:2*). In these texts we can see examples of how the children of Israel were determined to obey the Word of God and how they rejoiced in it.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 9.

The People Gather

Read Nehemiah 8:1, 2. What should this tell us about how important the Word of God was to the people?

When the Jews finally completed the building of the wall and moved into Jerusalem, they all gathered in Jerusalem's open square in the seventh month. The seventh month, the month of Tishri, was perhaps the most important month for the Israelites, as it was dedicated to the Feast of Trumpets (preparation for God's judgment, first day of the month), the Day of Atonement (judgment day, 10th day of the month), and the Feast of Tabernacles (remembering God's deliverance from Egypt and His provision through the journey in the wilderness, 15th day of the month). The gathering took place on the first day of the month, on which the Feast of Trumpets was celebrated. The leaders called together the men and women of the nation for this special assembly in order, through the reading of the Law, to provide an opportunity for them to learn about their God and history.

The people invited Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses before them and to read it. They even constructed a platform, a pulpit, for the occasion. It was not something that the leaders forced on the congregation. On the contrary, "they," the people, told Ezra to bring the Book. Most likely Ezra read to the people from the books of Moses, which included the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Read Deuteronomy 31:9–13. What did the Lord tell them there, and what lessons can we take from that for ourselves?

In Deuteronomy 31:9–13, Moses told the Israelites that during the Feast of Tabernacles they were to gather and read together the Law of God, and it mentions the various groups that should gather: men, women, children, and foreigners living within their gates.

A literal reading of Nehemiah 8:1 says that they gathered together "as one man." What does that tell us about the importance of unity among the body of believers?

Reading and Hearing the Law

Ezra “brought the Law” before the assembly to read. What did he read to them? Only the Ten Commandments over and over for half a day? The reference to the book of the Law is to be understood as the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, known as the Hebrew Torah. The term “law,” therefore, covers only a part of what was included in the reading; it would be better to translate it as “instructions.” They are God’s instructions enabling us to know the path on which we should walk in order not to miss the goal. When Ezra read, the people heard about their history as the people of God, beginning with Creation through the time of Joshua. Through stories, songs, poems, blessings, and laws, they were reminded of their struggles in following God and of God’s faithfulness to them. The Torah includes “law,” but it is more than that; it incorporates the history of the people of God and especially reveals God’s leading. Consequently, it gave the community its roots and identity.

Read Nehemiah 8:3; Deuteronomy 4:1; 6:3, 4; Joshua 1:9; Psalm 1:2; Proverbs 19:20; Ezekiel 37:4; and Matthew 17:5. What do these verses teach us about how we are to interact with the Word of God?

That the people desired to hear the Word of God most likely was the result of Ezra’s reading and teaching the Word since his arrival in Jerusalem some 13 years before. He was dedicated to God’s work and determined to make a difference. The Word of God became real to the people as they kept hearing it from Ezra. As a result, they made a conscious decision to hear and to listen, because they were interested in hearing from God. Thus, on this occasion, they approached the Torah with reverence and a desire to learn.

Saturating ourselves in the Word creates a deeper yearning for God in our lives.

How do you relate to the Word of God? That is, even though you claim to believe it, how is that claim made manifest in your life, in the sense of how you seek to obey what it teaches? How differently would you live if you didn’t obey the Bible?

Reading and Interpreting the Word

Read Nehemiah 8:4–8. How was the reading of the Law done?

There were two groups of 13 men who stood with Ezra during the reading. The first group of 13 (*Neh. 8:4*) helped to read the Word of God, and the second group of 13 (*Neh. 8:7*) helped with the understanding of the passages. We do not have any information about how this arrangement worked in the open square; however, the men who helped with the reading possibly held the Torah (Hebrew scrolls were heavy and needed to be unrolled by others), as well as read from it successively, alternating between the readers. Because they were reading from morning until midday, they had figured out a way to reach everyone in the square.

The phrases “they gave the sense” and “helped the people to understand the reading” (*Neh. 8:8, NKJV*) can refer either to interpretation or translation of the passages. Both are just as likely in this instance. The people had returned from Babylon, where they had lived for many years, and the primary language there was Aramaic. Therefore, hearing the Hebrew reading may not have been easy to understand for many, especially the younger generations. At the same time, readers of the Bible can benefit from explanation or commentary. Preaching and explanation make the text come alive and press hearers to apply the information personally.

Read Acts 8:26–38. What happened here that parallels what was happening in Jerusalem in the texts above? What lessons are here for us?

As Protestants, we understand that individual believers must know the Word of God for themselves and that we must not blindly accept anyone else’s word on biblical truth, regardless of their authority. At the same time, who hasn’t been blessed by having someone help explain the meaning of texts? We need, each one of us, to know what we believe for ourselves, but this doesn’t mean that, at times, we can’t be enlightened by the teachings of others.

The People's Response

When Ezra opens up the Word of God, the Hebrew Torah, the people stand up. Before Ezra reads, he blesses God. After he reads, the people respond with “Amen, Amen!” (*Neh. 8:5, 6, NKJV*) in unison as they lift their hands toward heaven. They then bow their heads down and worship with their faces to the ground.

Read Nehemiah 8:9–12. Why did the leaders tell the people not to “mourn nor weep”?

“So, in later years, when the law of God was read in Jerusalem to the captives returned from Babylon, and the people wept because of their transgressions, the gracious words were spoken: ‘Mourn not. . . . Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ Nehemiah 8:9, 10.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 281.

As the people were listening to the words of God, they were struck by their own sinfulness and began to weep. When God reveals Himself to us, and we begin to grasp that God is full of love, goodness, mercy, and faithfulness, our own inadequacies and failure to be what we should be come to the forefront. Seeing God’s holiness through His Word causes us to see our terribleness in a new light. This realization caused the people of Israel to weep and mourn, but they were not to sorrow, “for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (*Neh. 8:10*). In other words, despite their failures, they could trust in the power of God.

This also was a special day, a holy day, the Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah), on which short blasts of the trumpets signaled the importance of “heart” preparation for the judgment of the Lord (Day of Atonement, celebrated on the 10th day of the month of Tishri). The blowing of the trumpets signaled a call to stand before God and repent. Because the day was designed to remind the people to turn to God, the weeping and mourning is understandable. But the leaders reminded them that once they had repented, God had heard them, and therefore it was time to rejoice in God’s forgiveness.

What should it tell us about just how bad sin is that it put Jesus on the cross as the only way to solve the problem of sin and to give us hope?

The Joy of the Lord

The “joy of the LORD is your strength” (*Neh. 8:10*) serves as a reminder that it is God’s will that we rejoice and enjoy life. Most of all, it is not just any kind of joy, but the joy that comes because we know God and the reality of His love. Delighting in God, in His goodness, and rejoicing because of everything God has provided for us is something that we should strive to be doing every day. Moreover, delighting in God gives us the strength to face the day and to handle what comes our way.

Read Nehemiah 8:13–18. What happened here, and what does it tell us about the people and their leaders at this time?

The next day, the leaders of the people come to Ezra in order to learn more from God’s book. This initiative demonstrated by the leaders showed their desire to lead the community toward God. They understood that leading the people the right way would not happen if they themselves did not seek God and seek knowledge from Him.

Read Leviticus 23:39–43. What were the Israelites commanded to do, and why?

Notice that in Nehemiah 8:15 the texts refer to the fact that what they were doing was according to what is “written.” We see here another example of how seriously they now wanted to obey the Word of God, ideally because after decades in captivity they had learned their lesson about disobedience. Also, in the texts in Leviticus they were to celebrate the feast and to “rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days” (*Lev. 23:40, NKJV*). In other words, as they remember God’s acts of mercy and grace and salvation, the people were to rejoice in what the Lord had done for them.

Think about what we have been given in Jesus, who was symbolized in all of ancient Israel’s feasts. How can we learn to rejoice in the Lord even during difficult and painful trials? Why, especially during these times, is it crucial for us to do so?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Instructed in the Law of God,” pp. 661–668, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Now they must manifest faith in His promises. God had accepted their repentance; they were now to rejoice in the assurance of sins forgiven and their restoration to divine favor. . . .

“Every true turning to the Lord brings abiding joy into the life. When a sinner yields to the influence of the Holy Spirit, he sees his own guilt and defilement in contrast with the holiness of the great Searcher of hearts. He sees himself condemned as a transgressor. But he is not, because of this, to give way to despair; for his pardon has already been secured. He may rejoice in the sense of sins forgiven, in the love of a pardoning heavenly Father. It is God’s glory to encircle sinful, repentant human beings in the arms of His love, to bind up their wounds, to cleanse them from sin, and to clothe them with the garments of salvation.”
—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 668.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 On what conditions may you experience “the joy of the LORD” (*Neh. 8:10*) as your strength? That is, is there something that we have to do in order to experience the power of God and His forgiveness in our lives? If so, what?
- 2 How do we find the right balance in mourning over our sins and yet, at the same time, rejoicing in the Lord? Are not these contradictory to each other? How do the law and gospel together provide the answer? See *Rom. 3:19–24*.
- 3 Read Nehemiah 8:10, in which Nehemiah says to the people, “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.” Eat the fat, drink the sweet, provide for those for whom nothing is prepared—and do all this because the “day is holy to our LORD”? What does this teach us about ways in which we can rejoice in the Lord? What does the fact that it is “holy” mean in this context?

Breaking a Curse

By CHANMIN CHUNG

Sunny and Salma met during orientation for first-year students at a university in the Middle East.

Sunny, who is from Asia, is a “Waldensian student,” a Seventh-day Adventist studying at a secular university in the Adventist Church’s Middle East and North Africa Union. Salma is a local student who grew up in a non-Christian family.

The two young women instantly became friends. They shared the same classes and lived in the same neighborhood. Salma soon learned that her new friend was an Adventist Christian. She had been taught to be wary of Christians, but Sunny seemed so kind and honest.

As their friendship grew, Salma accepted an invitation to attend a Friday evening meeting in Sunny’s home. Salma met other Adventists at the meeting, and she liked the friendly conversations. Soon she began to enjoy singing hymns and praying with the group every Friday evening.

After a year, Sunny invited Salma to visit an Adventist church, and she agreed. But Salma faced harsh criticism from family and friends.

“What did you do there?” one said.

“Does this mean you have become a Christian?” asked another.

Family members warned they would be cursed if she became a Christian. Salma was worried but kept going to church. She joined the youth choir and participated in health seminars. Her Adventist friends prayed for her.

One Friday evening, the group watched a video about Jesus’ life and, afterward, Salma asked to study the book of Acts. “I was surprised because Salma hadn’t been interested in Bible studies for about a year,” Sunny said.

Salma began weekly Bible studies, but she insisted that she had no desire to be baptized. She worried that her family would be cursed.

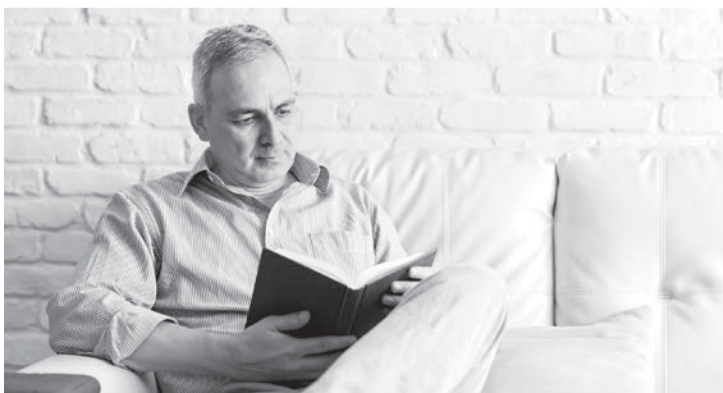
One Sabbath, Salma participated in a women’s retreat, during which each woman had to select a heart-shaped card and meditate on a Bible verse written inside. She prayerfully chose a card and opened it. Inside, she read, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you and your household will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Salma realized she didn’t need to worry about a curse falling on her family. She stood up and announced that she wanted to be baptized.



“This is not the end but the beginning,” Sunny said. “After I finish my studies, I plan to stay here to develop a lifelong friendship with people like Salma. I pray for God to send more people like her to me.”

CHANMIN CHUNG is communication coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Union.

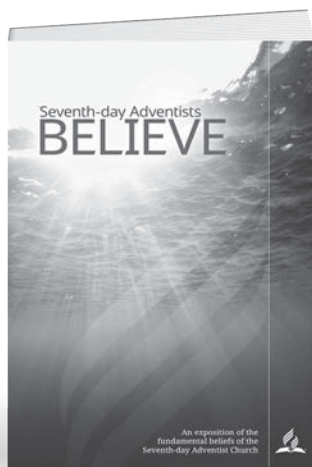


Explore, appraise, study, and substantiate each doctrine truth for yourself.

Seventh-day Adventists Believe

General Conference Ministerial Department

Seventh-day Adventists Believe is the official statement of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, including any changes voted at the 2015 General Conference Session. Each chapter begins with a short summary statement of the belief as voted by the General Conference in session. Study questions for deeper insight can be found at the end of each chapter.



→ **For eBooks** go to Adventist-eBooks.com!



AdventistBookCenter.com



[AdventistBookCenter](https://www.facebook.com/AdventistBookCenter)



[@AdventistBooks](https://twitter.com/AdventistBooks)

[YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/AdventistBooks)

[AdventistBooks](https://www.youtube.com/AdventistBooks)



Pacific Press®
PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION

3 WAYS TO ORDER: 1– Adventist Book Center® 2– 1-800-765-6955 3– AdventistBookCenter.com

© 2019 Pacific Press® Publishing Association • 1955903009 • Price subject to change • Please contact your ABC for pricing in Canada



TOTAL MEMBER INVOLVEMENT TIME

What is Total Member Involvement?

- ▶ Total Member Involvement (TMI) is a full-scale, world-church evangelistic thrust that involves every member, every church, every administrative entity, every type of public outreach ministry, as well as personal and institutional outreach.
- ▶ It is a calendar-driven, intentional soul-winning plan that discovers the needs of families, friends, and neighbors. Then it shares how God fulfills every need, resulting in church planting and church growth, with a focus on retaining, preaching, sharing, and discipling.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT TMI TIME IN SABBATH SCHOOL

Dedicate the first 15 minutes of each lesson to plan, pray and share:*

- ▶ **TMI IN-REACH:** Plan to visit, pray, care for missing or hurting members, and distribute territory assignments. Pray and discuss ways to minister to the needs of church families, inactive members, youth, women and men, and various ways to get the church family involved.
- ▶ **TMI OUT-REACH:** Pray and discuss ways of reaching your community, city, and world, fulfilling the Gospel Commission by sowing, reaping, and keeping. Involve all ministries in the church as you plan short-term and long-term soul-winning projects. TMI is about intentional acts of kindness. Here are some practical ways to become personally involved:
 1. Develop the habit of finding needs in your community.
 2. Make plans to address those needs.
 3. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ **TMI UP-REACH:** Lesson Study. Encourage members to engage in individual Bible study—make study of the Bible in Sabbath School participatory. Study for transformation, not information.

TMI	Time	Explanation
Fellowship Outreach World Mission	15 min.*	Pray, plan, organize for action. Care for missing members. Schedule outreach.
Lesson Study	45 min.*	Involve everyone in the study of the lesson. Ask questions. Highlight key texts.
Lunch		Plan lunch for the class after worship. THEN GO OUT AND REACH SOMEONE!

**Adjust times as necessary.*