

Sermon Title: Abiding in God's Word

Sermon by Pastor Tom Harrington
Week of January 23, 2011

Sermon Based Small Group Discussion Guide

Icebreaker

Big Idea: God's Word can have a tremendous impact on your life.

Sermon Text:

All the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given for Israel to obey. ² So on October 8 Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. ³ He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. To his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah. To his left stood Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. ⁵ Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet. ⁶ Then Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people chanted, "Amen! Amen!" as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷ The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah—then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, "Don't mourn or weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God." For the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ And Nehemiah continued, "Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet

drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!"

The book of Nehemiah, dated around 445 BC, can be divided into two basic parts: Part One (Chapters 1-7) has to do with "Rebuilding the Wall" around Jerusalem, which had been destroyed in 587 BC. Part Two (Chapters 8-13) has to do with "Reforming the People," who were broken, discouraged, and largely ignorant of God's law.

1. Why do you think the work of reforming the people would begin in the way described in our text?
2. What evidence do you see that indicates that the people valued the Book of the Law and held it in high regard? Do you think that we, as believers today, look in awe at the Bible? When hearing someone read from it, do we respond the way they did in the passage? If not, why not?
3. Why do you suppose the people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Law (v. 9)? Have you ever wept over your Bible?
4. The assembly ends with a feast, including sending portions 'to him for whom nothing is prepared' (v. 10). Why would people celebrate the fact that the Book of the Law of Moses had been recovered?

Like the ancient Jews, Baptists place a strong emphasis on the Word of God revealed in sacred writings. One of the earliest Baptist confessions of faith begins with a statement about the authority of the Bible: "We believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried." – The New Hampshire Baptist Confession, 1833. Declaration of Faith, Article 1, "Of the Scriptures."

5. What portion of this declaration strikes a responsive chord in you?
Does any portion of this declaration raise a question?

Christians often refer to God speaking to them in a personal way through the ancient text of the Bible. When they open the Bible they pray for the Holy Spirit's illumination, anticipating a dynamic encounter: *For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires* (Hebrews 4:12).

"The external letter must become an inner Word through the work of the Spirit. ... In one sense, of course, the Bible is a past text under our examining eyes. But in another sense it is an instrument of the Spirit peering into our lives and questioning us. The Word of God is 'at work' in believers and not merely something they have control over (1 Thessalonians 2:13). ... Though we interpret the Bible, in a sense it also interprets us if we are open to it. 'The word of God is not bound' (2 Timothy 2:9). ... God himself meets us in his Word and makes the truth live. – Clark Pinnock, The Scripture Principle, p. 156

6. Can you remember a time when God spoke to you through Scripture? How did that happen?
7. Do you have a "Life Verse," or a favorite verse, a favorite book of the Bible or a favorite Bible story? How did that particular portion of Scripture become meaningful to you?

The Apostle Paul speaks of the 'Spirit of ... revelation' who operates in the believing heart to give a personal appreciation of all God has revealed and given (Ephesians 1:17). Consider for example the story of Lydia: *On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. ¹⁵ She was baptized along with other members of her household, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we agreed* (Acts 16:13-15).

"The God who caused light to shine out of darkness is able to send shafts of spiritual light into our hearts to disclose the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." – Pinnock, p. 162.

8. Have you ever had an experience of the Spirit opening your heart to respond to a sermon or Bible lesson? What happened?

"As Christians we must never deny that God speaks to individuals, but what he says is consistent with what he has already said to the church as a whole. The individuals through whom this revelation was given were specially chosen, and had an authority which no Christian today can claim. – Gerald Bray, Biblical Interpretation, p. 15.

9. How do we know when a message is from God and not some other source?

Taking it Home

Do you have a personal time of regular Bible reading (or listening to Bible audio)? If so, when? If you were to begin or expand such a practice, what challenges do you imagine you would face? (Mark all that apply.)

- Too busy
- Lack of desire
- Lack of understanding what I read
- I don't know how to apply what I read
- I'm not sure I'm ready to hear what God might say
- Other: _____

Prayer Requests and Praises:

1. Whenever you read or listen to Scripture, prayerfully invite the Holy Spirit to reveal God's truth to you.
2. How can the group pray for you and/or the need you identified during this Bible study?