

## Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 12 Air War and Ground War (Nehemiah 8:1–12)

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*“This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.”*

— Nehemiah 8:9

After lying in ruins for 141 years, the city of Jerusalem was finally rebuilt in fifty-two short days thanks to God’s grace, Nehemiah’s leadership, and the faithful service of God’s people. Shortly following completion, roughly 50,000 people moved back into the city. This week we witness the official launch of their church.

Their ministry included both an air war and a ground war. The air war involved the authoritative preaching of God’s Word by Ezra, the spiritual leader of God’s people. The ground war involved many personal meetings and conversations between people to explain what they had been taught in order to rightly understand and apply God’s Word to their lives.

These two aspects of ministry are incredibly important and are repeated throughout the New Testament church, where sermons were preached to the masses and people then gathered in smaller groups to unpack and apply what they learned. Subsequently, every church needs both an air war and a ground war. They must work in harmony as the complementary means by which God changes people through the truth of Scripture.

### Air War

Deals with the masses  
Is event centered  
Draws people to the church  
Proclaims with authority  
Provides general principles

### Ground War

Deals with individuals & small groups  
Is relationship centered  
Connects people to the church  
Explains with accountability  
Provides personal applications

### AIR WAR

*<sup>1</sup>And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate.*

Based on the totals of the previous chapter, this was roughly 50,000 people.

*And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. <sup>2</sup>So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.*

The first church service occurred only one week after the wall was completed because the worship of God was such a high priority for His people. This time of year was their equivalent of New Year’s Day and the perfect time to get right with the Lord. Ezra was the spiritual counterpart to Nehemiah, who was the administrative leader of the people. The two men worked out of their gifting, with Nehemiah as the administrator and Ezra as the pastor of the people. The two

men were apparently very humble as they willingly shared power and worked together with tremendous success.

Ezra's lengthy sermon was based on the entire Pentateuch (meaning "book in five parts"), the first five books of the Bible written by Moses. Every man and woman who was old enough to understand what was being taught came to listen to the sermon. Amazingly, we are even told that the people did not show up reluctantly to hear a sermon, but rather they actually told Ezra to bring out the Bible. Not only were the people hungry for God's Word, they also trusted Ezra to teach it to them and were eager to see him open Scripture.

*<sup>3</sup>And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.*

*<sup>4</sup>And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.*

Ezra's sermon lasted as long as six hours while some 50,000 people remained attentive to God's Word being preached with authority and clarity. A high pulpit had been built for the occasion so that the people could see and hear Ezra, and so that God's Word would both literally and figuratively be raised up in authority over the people. Joining Ezra on the platform were other godly leaders. The entire event likely looked very much like a Billy Graham Crusade, as he too draws large crowds and has spiritual leaders from the city he is preaching in join him on the stage.

*<sup>5</sup>And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.*

In reverent respect, the people stood when the Scriptures were open. They were showing their honor for God's Word as sacred and a gift to be received in humility.

*<sup>6</sup>And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

Ezra exalted God in his sermon. The people responded in worship that was passionate, audible in their words, and visible in their actions. In this we see that worship is our response to God's Word that must include our minds but must move beyond intellectual assent all the way to passionate worship of God.

The sight of 50,000 people repenting of sin and worshiping with their faces on the ground must have been an incredibly moving sight. The occasion was not a result of emotional manipulation, but rather a powerful move of God that is rightly understood as a revival. In times of revival, God does not do anything new, but rather does what He always does in greater numbers and greater depths than is normally seen (e.g., convicts people of sin, saves sinners, brings Christians to repentance, compels people to prayer, worship, and service, etc.).

## GROUND WAR

<sup>7</sup>Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. <sup>8</sup>They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

In addition to the air war of preaching, there was also the ground war of explaining the sermon. The event was organized much like our own church, where many of our community groups follow the weekly sermons to help people understand and apply what is preached from God's Word. The group leaders who were the family heads and ministry leaders (not unlike our elders, deacons, and various group leaders) met with individuals and groups of people to answer their questions, clear up their confusion, and help them apply what they had learned from Scripture to their lives. They were being taught to follow the pattern that Ezra 7:10 says Ezra himself followed—Scripture study that led to obedience and then the teaching of others.

Furthermore, in that day very few people had copies of the Scriptures as the printing press was not to be invented for nearly 2,000 years, and so to hear God's Word was a tremendous blessing. In addition, the Old Testament from which they read was originally written in Hebrew but most of the people spoke Aramaic. This meant that the Scriptures were translated, then preached by Ezra, and then applied to individual lives.

## GOSPEL JOY

<sup>9</sup>And 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 wept as they heard the words of the Law. <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And 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 quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." <sup>12</sup>And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Upon hearing God's law, the people were convicted by the Holy Spirit of their sin and came into deep remorse for the sin in their lives. In this we see that they rightly understood that the purpose of law is to convict us of sin (Romans 3:20). However, Ezra commanded God's people to move beyond their grief to a place of celebrating the forgiving grace of God. We see that the process God intends is that by learning Scripture we will be convicted of sin which leads to godly remorse. But, if we understand that Jesus died to take away our sin and replace it with His righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21), then the final work of the gospel must be worshipful joy. Simply, joy is God's gift to the repentant. Anyone who does not experience joy after humbly repenting of sin has not understood the gospel of grace; they are guilty of a grievous sin against God by continuing to mourn what He has forgiven and by living in light of what we have done rather

than what Jesus has done for us. Therefore, feasting and celebrating God's grace in lavishness is the final and true sign of those who are truly repentant.

**Next week:** Nehemiah 8:13–18

For more free resources on Nehemiah, go to:

- [http://covenantseminary.inmotionhosting.com/OT230\\_Lecture\\_36.mp3](http://covenantseminary.inmotionhosting.com/OT230_Lecture_36.mp3)  
(for seminary lectures)
- <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf> and  
<http://reformedperspectives.org/search.asp> (for study notes)
- <http://www.ccel.org/wsb/Nehemiah/index.html> (for older commentaries  
and similar resources)

If you can only buy one commentary on Nehemiah, I recommend J. I. Packer's *A Passion for Faithfulness*.