Unit 18, Session 3

God Revives His People Through a Scribe

Summary and Goal
In the beginning of Nehemiah’s memoirs, we see God’s kindness in raising up the right leaders for the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. In this session, we will see how the hearts of His people would be stirred through gathering to hear the word of God, confess sin, and commit to obedience as an expression of a sincere relationship. Consequently, we get a picture of God’s primary way of working in and through His people to accomplish the work He would have for them, namely, through the preaching of God’s Word as the people of God gather to worship.

Session Outline
1. God’s people gather to hear God’s word (Neh. 7:73b–8:6).
2. God’s people confess sin as they proclaim God’s glory (Neh. 9:1-5).

Background Passage: Nehemiah 8–13

Session in a Sentence
God’s Word brings an awareness of sin and prompts repentance.

Christ Connection
When God’s people heard the reading of His word, they responded by confessing their sins and committing to obey God’s law. They would later fail to obey God as they had promised. Jesus is the Word of God who takes away our sin, gives us His righteousness, and changes our hearts so we can obey God.

Missional Application
Because we have received salvation through Jesus, the Word of God, we seek to worship Him in all we do as one way we proclaim His glory to the nations.
My past history as a preteen and my present life as a father have taught me that the art of spot cleaning is passed on from parent to child. Every time I catch my kids cleaning only the front of their rooms in hope that I walk by and settle for a cursory glance, I smile slyly, and I think about how I mastered that art through the years. After whispering, “Rookie,” under my breath, I enter the room and explain that though play time with toys and the trampoline is calling, they still have work to complete.

Similarly for the people of God during the time of Nehemiah, though the walls were now rebuilt, their work was not complete. God was after complete restoration, socially and spiritually. Nehemiah and Ezra knew this. It wouldn’t be enough for the walls of the city to be rebuilt if the hearts of the people were still broken.

Absent a fresh spiritual awakening and revival, the people would devolve back into the things that brought judgment in the first place. So God worked to reorient and restore His people through the power of His word. The people would eventually stray again, not because God’s word isn’t strong but because the human heart is weak. Yet one day God would send the Word of God made flesh to take away our sin for good and bring us back to Him forever.

Why are we prone to settle for incomplete work instead of a job well done? (we are sinful and lazy; we can't accomplish our goals with the time or resources we have in the moment; it is easier to try to look good than to live in righteousness; we have other priorities)

In this session, we will see how the hearts of God’s people would be stirred through gathering to hear the word of God, confess sin, and commit to obedience as an expression of a sincere relationship. Consequently, we get a picture of God’s primary way of working in and through His people to accomplish the work He would have for them, namely, through the preaching of God’s Word as the people of God gather to worship.
Point 1: God’s people gather to hear God’s word (Neh. 7:73b–8:6).

READ Nehemiah 7:73b–8:6 (DDG p. 113).

7:73b When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, 8:1 all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had given Israel. 2 On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. 3 While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. 4 The scribe Ezra stood on a high wooden platform made for this purpose. Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiiah, and Maaseiah stood beside him on his right; to his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5 Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, “Amen, Amen!” Then they knelt low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 113) to show the centrality and effectiveness of God’s people gathered together to hear God’s word read and proclaimed.

Thousands of people gathered together in one place from morning until midday for one purpose—to refresh their hearts with the word of God. At their request, Ezra the priest read aloud the Book of the Law, which revealed God’s identity, work, and expectations.

• The Book of the Law contains some of the most unmarked parts of most people’s Bibles, yet the meticulous telling of God’s holiness and intentional care in establishing the temple and sacrificial system captivated the people’s hearts and attention for hours. Collectively, the people shouted “Amen!” but they did not offer praise to elevate themselves; they elevated the word of God in order to elevate the God behind and in the story.

• This unique gathering of God’s people to hear God’s word was simple and supernatural. Through it, God reaffirmed that His Word is powerful. Through the proclamation of His Word, God reinvigorates human hearts for a relationship rooted in right affections leading to right actions.

Commentary: The crowd that gathered to hear God’s law read aloud included over forty-two thousand men (7:66), plus women and children who could listen with understanding (8:2).
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways we complicate the simple proclamation and teaching of God’s Word? (we desire to be entertained instead of submitting ourselves to the Word; we hold Scripture sway to our biases instead of reevaluating our biases in light of Scripture; we make sermons and lessons more about the speaker and less about the Scripture)

PACK ITEM 14: A HOLY DAY: Read the Bede quote on this poster and use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 113) and the leader content below to emphasize that God’s Word is worthy of proclamation, which was demonstrated in the people’s commitment to the word and the content of the word.

Errands were put on hold, hobbies suspended, and to-do lists went undone because God’s attributes and activities were being proclaimed aloud. The people’s commitment to hear and the content they heard declared a simple reality: God’s Word is worthy of proclamation.

- The worthiness of God’s word was seen not just in the complete and willing adjustment of His people to reorient their day around it to hear it but in the content it contains, which calls for people to reorient their entire lives around it. The Book of Deuteronomy culminates with a call to choose between life and death, between obedience and disobedience, between blessings and curses (Deut. 30:19). The call was for the people to conform to God’s word in glad obedience.
- The people recognized that their past experience of shame and exile was a direct result of their failure to cherish and adhere to the word of God. From Genesis to this moment, God’s word had been regularly distorted, disbelieved, and disregarded, leading to pain and brokenness in their individual and corporate lives. They also recognized that their present situation was them experiencing the grace of God in remembering His promises in His word and pouring out His kindness on them: their walls were rebuilt, their shame removed, their dignity and hope restored because they returned to Him (Deut. 30:1-5).

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 113).

Preservation of Scripture: God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity through the text of Scripture. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully preserved for future generations.

Essential Doctrine “Preservation of Scripture”: God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity through the text of Scripture, having inspired it and directed it to be free from error. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully preserved for future generations. Our belief in the preservation of Scripture is supported by investigation into how the canon of Scripture was formed and how manuscripts were faithfully transmitted throughout the centuries.
Point 2: God’s people confess sin as they proclaim God’s glory (Neh. 9:1-5).


1 On the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites assembled; they were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads. 2 Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 While they stood in their places, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the LORD their God. 4 Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the raised platform built for the Levites and cried out loudly to the LORD their God. 5 Then the Levites—Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah—said, “Stand up. Blessed be the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting.”

On this day of gathering as the people of God, confession of sin was a primary focus. Having heard the law of Moses read for a week straight (8:18), the people felt the weight of their guilt and shame. So they confessed their sin, both individually and corporately. As a people, they bore the consequences of their forefathers’ sins in the reality of their exile and oppression, so they felt it necessary to identify with their fathers and confessed their fathers’ sins along with their own (9:2).

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 114) to highlight how the people confessed their sin both individually and corporately.

On this day of gathering as the people of God, confession of sin was a primary focus. Having heard the law of Moses read for a week straight (8:18), the people felt the weight of their guilt and shame. So they confessed their sin, both individually and corporately. As a people, they bore the consequences of their forefathers’ sins in the reality of their exile and oppression, so they felt it necessary to identify with their fathers and confessed their fathers’ sins along with their own (9:2).

The prayer of confession and praise in verses 5-37 demonstrates how the people identified with their forefathers: they rehearsed the sins and failures of their people through the ages, recognized God’s just judgment of their forefathers, and proclaimed God’s righteousness in that judgment, even through it extended to them as their descendants. Yet this identification didn’t eliminate their own individual sense of responsibility and guilt for their own sins (vv. 36-37).

Commentary: This pattern of interweaving corporate responsibility and individual responsibility isn’t a biblical anomaly:

–In Exodus 32, after the sin of the people in creating a golden calf in idol worship, Moses willingly identified with his people in their sin and punishment (Ex. 32:31-32). God declared He would hold the individuals accountable, but Moses’ willingness on this point was noteworthy (32:33-35).

–After Joshua succeeded Moses to lead the people to carry out the plans and promises of God, they came to the city of Ai, where they suffered a significant defeat (see Josh. 7:1-12). The people as a whole shared in the suffering of Achan’s personal disobedience, but he and his immediate family felt the full effects of his sin in the Lord’s judgment (7:20-26).
**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 114).

**Guilt and Shame:** Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an **objective** sense and also feel the weight of shame in a **subjective** sense.

**Essential Doctrine “Guilt and Shame”**: Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it (Matt. 5:21-22; Jas. 2:10). Shame is the emotional pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an **objective** sense and also feel the weight of shame in a **subjective** sense.

**EXPLAIN:** Reference the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 114) as you explain how **confession** of sin resulted in **praise** of the Lord.

God’s work of restoring the people's hearts continued with reestablishing rhythms of confession and worship in the life of His people. From the Sabbath to honoring and adhering to holy days (8:13-18), the people were on a pathway to intimacy with God and each other, which involved the profound act of **confession** culminating in **praise**.

- The motivation for the people’s **confession** and **praise** was their knowledge of God as loving, merciful, kind, and forgiving. The **praise** of God's name along with pouring out their **confession** of sin reveals a confidence and assurance of pardon. In their **confession**, they acknowledged and affirmed the sin they committed and the shame and guilt they bore while simultaneously offering **praise** to God, bringing to light the realities of God’s forgiveness, grace, and compassion (9:5-37). They confessed fully because they knew they would be forgiven completely (see 1 John 1:7,9).

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

What is the connection between confession of sin and praise for God? *(praise of God for who He is and what He has done for us in Christ should lead to confession of sin; confession with full assurance of pardon through the shed blood of Jesus should lead us to praise the Lord; the God who delights in the confession and repentance of His people is trustworthy and praiseworthy)*
Point 3: God’s people commit to obey God’s law (Neh. 10:28-29).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 10:28-29 (DDG p. 115).

28 The rest of the people—the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants, along with their wives, sons, and daughters, everyone who is able to understand and who has separated themselves from the surrounding peoples to obey the law of God—29 join with their noble brothers and commit themselves with a sworn oath to follow the law of God given through God’s servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances, and statutes of the LORD our Lord.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 115) to note the accountability inherent in the people’s communal commitment as a family to obey the law of God.

The people highlighted in this passage were following the lead of their governor, Nehemiah, and their other national and spiritual leaders (9:38–10:27). This communal commitment reflected a diverse group of people united in heart for accountability. The goal of their commitment was obedience to the law of God for the glory of God and for their preservation as a people, as a family of God.

- Because the people confessed their sin and praised the Lord in Nehemiah 9:5-37, the leaders of the people chose to bind themselves together for obedience to God’s law as an example to the rest of the community (9:38). They signed their names to their mutual agreement, creating a relationship of accountability (9:38–10:1). The particulars of their vow included fidelity to the Lord in marriage, keeping the Sabbath, and support of the Lord’s temple (10:30-39).

- Beyond their shared history of exile and return, the people shared the intimate bond of family. Families of people joined together with their “brothers” in this covenant of obedience. This should also be the bond we experience within our churches—a family of fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers (see 1 Tim. 5:1-2). Family isn’t just a metaphor for God’s people; it’s an identity. Sharing history might create intimacy and accountability but sharing in a God-focused family ensures it.

- Accountability may sound like policing or judging. But the reality is that the soil for accountability is relationship. It’s the relationship we’re committing to, not just a rule we’re adhering to. The relationship of mutual love among this family’s members disarms suspicion. Strength is shared and situations are shouldered together. Success is celebrated together, which creates momentum, and failure is wept over together with encouragement toward a better future.
**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

Why are people prone to shun accountability in their relationships within the family of God? (we don’t want people to know about our shortcomings; we are prideful and think we don’t need others to help us walk in faith and obedience; we don’t want others to look down on us; we don’t trust others to love us if they know our struggles; we misunderstand God’s purpose of growth and encouragement for relationships within the body of Christ)

**EXPLAIN:** Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 115) to establish that obedience is an act of faith and love.

Every command God gives is good. Every restriction God gives is good. The lies of the enemy that resonate the most in our sinful hearts are the ones that suggest God is withholding something good from us, that He doesn’t care (see Gen. 3:4-6). Obedience, therefore, is an act of faith in the good character and heart of God, even when times are difficult. In other words, obedience is a statement of love that indicates our relationship with God is of more value than whatever we want to do at any given moment.

• In sincerity, the people recommitted themselves to obey the covenant God had made with their forefathers, yet their tendency as sinners—and ours—was to drift away from obedience. Thankfully, God’s commitment and love toward His people is infinitely stronger than our commitment to obey. Otherwise, we would have no hope of salvation.

• Obedience to the Lord remains important in the life of God’s people. It is not enough simply to listen to God’s Word and do nothing with it. According to the Bible, that isn’t listening; to listen is more than hearing, it is action, obeying what has been heard (see Deut. 6:1-9)

• The obedience that God desires from His people isn’t merely blind, detached, dutiful loyalty; obedience should come from a faithful, affectionate, and intentional love for our Father. Jesus embodied this kind of faithful love in His perfect obedience, which flowed from the perfect eternal love He’s always shared with and for His Father (John 17:24,26). Faith and love are prerequisites for God-honoring obedience. In fact, faith and love, not obedience, comprise the foundational reality of our relationship with God.

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

How have you experienced obedience being an act of faith and love for God? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)
EXPLAIN: God’s plan for restoration didn’t stop at social reconstruction; He wanted to revive and renew His people from within. While protection came through a cupbearer, revival entailed a scribe, with God and His word being at the center of it all. Even so, the snapshot of revival that Nehemiah’s memoirs contain is only a partial picture of a future promise and an even greater work of renewal. Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience, shouldering on His cross the weight of all our failures. Through this act of justice, grace, and love, Jesus pulls together a people from all nations and languages into a family united by His death and resurrection. The people of God, now with hearts changed by grace and empowered to obey from faith and love, gather to celebrate and proclaim the name of Jesus to the world.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 116), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we have received salvation through Jesus, the Word of God, we seek to worship Him in all we do as one way we proclaim His glory to the nations.

- How do you need to respond in faith to the reading of God’s Word?
- What are some ways your group can cultivate rhythms of confession and accountability with one another?
- What commitment of faithful obedience will you make with respect to sharing the gospel with others?

CLOSE IN PRAYER: God, be merciful to us sinners by stirring from within us the repentance we desperately need. Thank You for preserving Your holy law so that its exposure to us would in turn expose our sin. Help us by the Holy Spirit to commit to obeying Your Word as we follow after Your Son, Jesus, who for our sake obeyed Your law to the fullest extent to represent us, died on the cross to achieve our forgiveness, and was raised to obtain our justification. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 117-119), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 120) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 117-119) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 120) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 117-119) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.

- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 2 as a part of point 2 in the session: The Jews’ song of confession highlighted a reason to praise the Lord—He is gracious in His forgiveness and faithful in His patience.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- Day 3: “Obedience for the Christian must be both an outworking of our faith in Christ and an expression of our love for God.”

- Day 5: “This ought always to be our desire as Christians—not to please human beings but the God whose favor is everlasting (Gal. 1:10).”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 120) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- Encourage group members to check on one another regularly to ensure that each of them is intentionally allowing God’s Word to engage them.

- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

Point 1: God’s people gather to hear God’s word (Neh. 7:73b–8:6).

“This passage helps us understand the faithful preaching of God’s Word. First, it is based in Scripture. It does not focus on the preacher’s thoughts but the actual text of the Bible. All throughout the day, Ezra’s audience was united as they listened to the reading of God’s law. And they listened with reverence and respect (Nehemiah 8:5). Then they responded not just with their minds but with their hearts … The teachers clearly explained the meaning (Nehemiah 8:8). The preacher’s job is merely to be the vessel to help the people understand the words of God, no more or no less. Finally, it affected life and heart change. Their tears of repentance showed how deeply they were impacted. That day, their understanding of the law drove them to truly worship God. They wept over their sin and were brought to repentance (Nehemiah 8:9; 9:1-13). When the Word was preached, explained and lived out, then Nehemiah said it was time to celebrate! God’s people had a great celebration around the goodness of God, the truth of his Word, and the wonder of their restoration.”

“Exactly what made up the book of the law has been the subject of intense discussion. Probably Ezra read the legal sections of a Pentateuch that was virtually identical to what we have today. It does not say that he read it in its entirety, but that he read out of it … The phrase Ezra opened the book is a little anachronistic since the book (codex) did not appear until the Christian era. Literally the phrase is, ‘Ezra unrolled the scroll.’ The apostle Paul specifically instructed, ‘Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching’ (1 Tim. 4:13). Standing for the reading of the Word is as appropriate now as it was in Ezra’s time. Worship for the people was not just a mental exercise, but it invoked the whole worshiper, who stood, spoke, and kneeled in humility before God.”

Point 2: God’s people confess sin as they proclaim God’s glory (Neh. 9:1-5).

“Wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads signified deep distress. Sackcloth was a course garment of dark goat or camel hair. It had a rough texture that served as a means of physical discomfort, outwardly calling attention to the person’s inner turmoil of grief. Additionally, the people broke off any alliances they had with foreigners or non-Jews as a sign of how seriously they were taking God’s Word (see also Deut. 23:3-8).”
“On returning from exile, the Jews had been required to prove that they were descended from Israelite ancestors. Now, *those of Israelite descent … separated themselves from all foreigners* (9:2; Ezra 10:10-12). After the congregation had once again read from the *Book of the Law*, the Levites led the people in confessional prayer and worship (9:3-4). The prayer is one of the great congregational or liturgical prayers in Scripture. Written as poetic prose, it moves smoothly from praise (9:5-6) to petition (9:32), from confession of sins (9:33-35) to complaint (9:36).”

**Point 3: God’s people commit to obey God’s law (Neh. 10:28-29).**

“After the history just rehearsed, the people’s covenant with God seems encouraging but doubtful. Ezra has already uncovered disobedience to laws about marriage (Ezra 9–10; see Deut. 7:1-5). The people’s oaths echo those of an earlier generation on the brink of the Promised Land: to their confident promises to serve the Lord, Joshua retorted that they were not able (Josh. 24:16-19). The scene in Nehemiah 10 is beautiful, with God’s people restored, united, and acknowledging his law in the most crucial areas of life and worship. But of course we must read on, looking and longing for the joy of final restoration, the full obedience to God’s law that comes only with the Son of God—the One made sin even though he ‘knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21). Through him, believers are assured that one day they will be swept up into the perfect and final restoration of all things (Rev. 21:1-22:5).”

“The phrase ‘all who separated themselves’ indicates that this was a definite community with definite limits. Separation from the neighboring peoples was important to maintain the distinctive beliefs and ethical principles of the community. God still wants his people to be separate by repudiating values and beliefs that are contrary to his will. We must take seriously the scriptural emphasis on separation without falling into an isolationist situation. The other danger is to accommodate the world so much that we fall into a syncretism that loses our Christian way of thinking and acting. In the situation of Ezra and Nehemiah, separation was imperative to secure the continuity of the redeemed community. ‘Sons and daughters able to understand’ reminds us that the young people and children must be included in community commitment.”

**References**

Think about the encouragement people often share to help others through times of adversity. We might hear someone speak of how pressure is required to transform coal into a diamond; thus, pressure can be good for us, transforming us into someone better. Or we might be told of the hatching that has to work to break through its eggshell, and that struggle is good for this creature—even necessary—so that it grows strong. Likewise, adversity strengthens us and positions us to be who we were meant to be.

While these illustrations might provide encouragement, they reveal something quite important about the world’s view of adversity. The world sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to dig deep, gaze within their soul, and discover who he or she truly is. But the gospel tells a different story—a better story. The gospel sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to look high above, gaze upon Christ, and see who He truly is. For it is Christ, not ourselves, who carries us through all trials and suffering. Adversity positions us to rely on Christ’s power, not an inner human strength that has been lying dormant.

In this volume we pick up the story of Scripture with the Jews living in bondage in a foreign land, the result of their rebellion against God. But even in the midst of judgment, God’s faithful love still shines forth brightly. We will witness God continuing to guide, strengthen, and protect His people in their time of great adversity, not to help them discover who they were but rather to understand who He is. At the same time, we will see God continue to drive the events of history toward the fulfillment of His ancient promise to provide the Rescuer, the One who would free people from an even greater bondage, that of sin and death.