

SESSION 1: RETURN TO GOD

JONAH 1:1-3; 3:1-5,10

Jonah 1:1-3 Commentary

[VERSE 1] **Jonah son of Amittai** was a prophet God used to speak to Israel’s Northern Kingdom during the first half of the eighth century B.C. **The word of the Lord** Jonah received and that is recorded in this book differed dramatically from the prophecy mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. We don’t know which revelation and experience preceded the other or if they occurred at about the same period of time. Neither can we say for sure exactly how the Lord communicated His word to Jonah.

[VERSE 2] The Lord commanded the prophet Jonah, **“Get up! Go to ... Nineveh and preach against it.”** These were marching orders, not suggestions or requests. In the Old Testament, prophets were regarded as servants of the Lord (see 2 Kings 9:7; Jer. 7:25). Servants were expected to obey their master immediately and fully.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. The Assyrian army had invaded Israel several times and forced the Israelites to pay a heavy tribute. Nineveh was located in what is now northern Iraq, not far from the city of Mosul. The Assyrian empire was already a threat during Jonah’s lifetime and continued to grow in strength and violence (see 2 Kings 15–16). The Lord provided two descriptors of the city of Nineveh that are important to the narrative. First, He noted that Nineveh was a **great city**. The Hebrew term translated *great* had both literal and figurative meanings. Taken literally, it referred to the city’s large size and, by implication, its vast population. Figuratively, the term could refer to the city’s great standing in the world—its importance. The second key feature about Nineveh was that its **wickedness** had **confronted** God and was about to be judged by Him. The Lord, the righteous Judge of all the earth (see Gen. 18:25), was preparing to bring judgment against the city. But consistent with His patient nature, the Lord would first warn the people through His prophet (see Amos 3:7; 2 Pet. 3:9).

[VERSE 3] **Jonah got up**. But instead of setting out for Nineveh, he went in the opposite direction. He made his way to the port city of **Joppa** on Israel’s Mediterranean coast. Jonah’s goal was clear. He aimed to flee **to Tarshish**—a place he hoped to escape God’s presence. The narrative casts a shadow over Jonah’s blatant disobedience by noting repeatedly that Jonah went down. **He went down to Joppa**, then he went **down** into the **ship**. Indeed, the prophet descended into the “lowest part of the vessel” (1:5), and soon enough would go down “into the depths, into the heart of the seas” (2:3) where he would feel as though he had sunk to a prison beneath “the foundations of the mountains” (v. 6).

Many of the Old Testament prophets displayed courageous obedience to the Lord. At this point in his life, however, Jonah was not among them. He rebelled against the commission to take the Lord’s message to another people group.

Jonah 3:1-5 Commentary

[VERSES 1-2] Few statements in Scripture express the grace of God as clearly as in Jonah 3:1, **the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time**. Second chances are an expression of God’s grace. However, we should respond positively to God’s call when it first comes and not presume that we will get a second chance.

[VERSE 3] This verse purposely stands in sharp contrast to 1:3. Whereas previously Jonah went in the opposite direction of his God-given mission, this time the prophet **got up** and obeyed the Lord. He acted **according to the Lord’s command** and **went to Nineveh**. Keeping this command involved no small amount of effort, as the prophet would have to travel hundreds of miles—most likely on foot—over roads that sometimes proved to be dangerous, according to later reports (see Ezra 8:21).

Nineveh was an extremely large city. According to ancient Greek and Roman writers, Nineveh was the largest city in the world at that time. The phrase **a three-day walk** underscores this ancient city’s vastness, but Bible commentators have proposed three possible meanings for it: (1) it indicates the number of days required to walk across or around the city; (2) it reflects the time

required to visit and preach throughout all areas of the city; or (3) it is a figurative idiom for a lengthy journey, thus depicting a huge area. (The second option seems most likely based on the opening words of Jonah 3:4). Modern archaeological investigations estimate the population within the walled portion of the city probably maxed out at 175,000 residents (see 4:11).

[VERSE 4] Once Jonah arrived, he obediently set about fulfilling the task God had set before him. On the first day of his walk in the city the prophet proclaimed what is perhaps the shortest recorded sermon in the Bible—only five words in the Hebrew language. Yet it contained everything the Ninevites needed to know: **in 40 days Nineveh would be demolished!** The message contained no word of hope, only the announcement of imminent destruction.

[VERSE 5] In response to the prophet’s faithful proclamation of God’s message, **the men of Nineveh believed in God.** God’s word did more than change the people’s hearts; it changed their behavior as well. **They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least.** Fasting for religious purposes involved voluntarily refusing to eat food and (sometimes) refusing to drink liquids for a time. Those who fasted demonstrated that they desired God’s help more than even basic physical sustenance. Sackcloth, mentioned more than 40 times in the Bible, was a scratchy, black wool cloth usually made of goat hair (see Rev. 6:12). Cultures across the biblical world wore garments made of sackcloth as a symbolic expression of deep personal distress.

Jonah 3:10 Commentary

[VERSE 10] God was watching. He **saw** how the people responded to His message. He knew their belief in Him was being demonstrated in **actions—that they had turned from their evil ways.** The people had genuinely repented. So what did God do in response? He mercifully **relented from the disaster He had threatened to do to them.**

The Hebrew word translated “relented” (*nacham*) is difficult to render accurately. It can mean “repented,” “had compassion,” or “changed His mind.” The thought of God changing His mind causes difficulty for some Christians. How can God decree a particular outcome, and then move in a direction different from His earlier pronouncement? Two things should be kept in mind.

First, we are speaking of a God whose ways are infinitely beyond our ability to comprehend (see Isa. 55:9; Rom. 11:33-34). Sometimes Scripture illustrates divine action using language that represents the actions of finite human beings, but the reality of what God does and how He does it is far greater than human language can express or the human mind can grasp. The second thing to remember is that when God changes His mind, it is because He has compassion for people and responds to genuine repentance (see Ex. 32:12). It can be in His plan both to punish sin and to relent when people repent. This passage speaks of the incredible mercy of God’s heart toward sinners.

Once the Ninevites had been wicked; they were spiritually blind to the destruction coming their way. Then Jonah preached God’s message to them. They repented. They could now see their sins and the sovereign Lord to whom they were accountable. They believed, and the God of grace and mercy forgave them, sparing their city from destruction.

This event has the seed of the gospel planted in its very heart. The God who spared the Ninevites also one day sent His Son Jesus into the world with an urgent message: “Repent and believe in the good news!” (Mark 1:15). The good news was that by His atoning death and resurrection, sinners then or today can repent, believe, and receive forgiveness and eternal life.

SESSION 2: RETURN TO YOUR FIRST LOVE

REVELATION 2:1-7

Revelation 2:1-4 Commentary

The apostle John was in exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). As John worshiped on the Lord's day (v. 10), Jesus appeared to him with a message for the churches in Asia Minor who were facing intense times of persecution. The Lord instructed John to write seven letters to seven churches. The first of these letters was to the church in Ephesus (2:1-7).

[VERSE 1] Jesus instructed John to **write to the angel of the church in Ephesus**. When this letter was penned, the city of Ephesus contained a population somewhere between 100,000 and 250,000 people, making it an extremely large city for its day. In the middle of this cosmopolitan city with its pagan worship, the gospel had taken hold. The apostle Paul spent three years there, more than in any other city (Acts 20:31). Timothy served as a pastor in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), and later John, the writer of Revelation, was its pastor. Jesus identified Himself as **the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand** and as the One who **walks among the seven gold lampstands** (see Revelation 1:20).

[VERSE 2] Jesus' commended the church for four things. First, He commended their **works**—a general word for the work of the church. He also praised their **labor**. This word described the difficult things the church had to do, probably in the face of extreme opposition. He also praised the church's **endurance**; they did not shirk their responsibility in the face of persecution. Finally, the church did not **tolerate evil**. The church stood for purity. Also, they tested **those who call themselves apostles and are not**. They did not gullibly accept leaders but tested them to make sure they lined up with the truth.

[VERSE 3] The church did not tolerate immoral behavior or false doctrine (v. 2), but they did tolerate hardships and persecution. They did not grow **weary** because they carried in themselves the name of Jesus Christ. Based on verses 1-3 we might describe the Ephesian congregation as a diligent, hardworking church that stood strongly in the face of persecution and stood against incorrect doctrine. Yet, this wasn't enough. Their commendation was followed by a condemnation.

[VERSE 4] The word **but** marks a transition in tone. The church in Ephesus seemed to have everything except the main thing—love. In the midst of their work, their toil, and their endurance in opposing false teaching, they had abandoned the one thing that mattered most. Jesus condemned the church because they had **abandoned the love they had at first**. The greatest commandment in the Old Testament was to love the Lord with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength (see Deut. 6:5; Mark 12:30). Though the church at Ephesus had maintained doctrinal purity and continued to do good works, they had forgotten that everything they did needed to be motivated by a love for Christ.

Revelation 2:5 Commentary

[VERSE 5] The cure for the loveless church at Ephesus included two steps. First, Jesus told the church to **remember then how far** they had **fallen**. They were to recall the love they had for the Lord and for one another when they first believed. The words *have fallen* do not indicate that they had lost their salvation; rather, they had gone backward in their devotion to Christ. The first step in changing an attitude or a behavior must be admission of guilt. By remembering where they once were in their love for the Lord, they would immediately see the need for the next step.

Second, as the Ephesian Christians compared their love for the Lord with what it was when they first believed, they would naturally see the need to **repent**. Repentance involves a change of mind or a turning from one thing to another. Jesus encouraged the Ephesian Christians to turn from good works that were not motivated by love and **do the works they did at first**.

Have you noticed that you can do the same activity with two different attitudes and get two different results? You can do the right thing out of duty and obligation alone and miss the joy of doing it out of love. That's how one child can get bitter while caring for

an aging parent—because love is absent—while another can receive joy out of what many think is a thankless task because the love for the parent is what motivates him.

Jesus promised that if the Ephesian Christians did not repent, He would **come** and **remove** their **lampstand from its place**. Some inaccurately believe that this teaches He will take away a Christian's salvation if he or she does not repent. However, we must remember that the lampstand represented the church. The congregation would cease to exist because it had lost its love for the Lord, which in turn caused it to lose its love for people.

God's judgment on a loveless church is necessary and actually enhances His kingdom's work. Certainly it is tragic when a church's lampstand is removed; however, it's even more tragic for that church to remain open without loving the Lord and loving people. This removal is not automatic, though. The hope is that by remembering their first love, the church will turn back to Him.

Jesus used the word **repent** for a second time in verse five, which emphasizes the importance of the command. He didn't reprimand the church to make them feel bad, but to heal them.

Revelation 2:6-7 Commentary

[VERSE 6] After chiding the church for losing its first love, Jesus again stated a positive aspect of the church. He commended them because they hated the **practices of the Nicolaitans**. The Nicolaitans were a heretical group that had infiltrated the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira, as well as Ephesus. This group taught immoral practices and idolatry, probably in a similar style to the heresy taught by Balaam (see Num. 31:16; 2 Pet. 2:15). Once again, the doctrinal purity and moral behavior of the Ephesian Christians did matter; the Lord revealed that He also hated the practices of the Nicolaitans. Love does not mean turning a blind eye to wrong doctrine or behavior. But without love, the church could not continue to thrive and exist.

[VERSE 7] Jesus echoed the warning He had given to His hearers at the end of the parable of the sower (see Matt. 13:9) when He said, **"Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches."** All seven letters in Revelation 2–3 include this expression.

Jesus promised a reward to the **victor**. The victor obviously was the one who has remembered from where he had fallen and repented of his sin. Ultimately, a believer's victory is based on the blood of Jesus Christ (see Rev. 12:11), not human effort. Since the Holy Spirit is active in remembering and repentance, this victory is not some human achievement, but a work of God in the life of a believer.

The victorious one was promised a special privilege: **the right to eat from the tree of life**. The tree of life first appeared in Genesis 2:9, where it was one of the many trees that God made available to Adam and Eve for food. However, when Adam and Eve instead ate from the one forbidden tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—God made this tree off limits (see Gen. 3:22,24) and banned Adam and Eve from the garden. The tree of life is mentioned again in Revelation 22:2.

Jesus mentioned the location of the tree with the phrase, **in God's paradise**. *Paradise* was a word that literally meant a garden. The Book of Revelation, beginning here in chapter two, portrays Jesus as the Restorer of the lost paradise (see Rev. 22:1-4). What a beautiful thought to think that Jesus is able to restore everything that was lost in the fall of humanity. By eating of the tree of life, death and suffering are banished and cannot touch the one who has trusted in Jesus (v. 2).

Sometimes Christians and churches get caught in a routine or rut. They go through the motions rather than doing what they do out of love for Christ and love for people. True awakening involves remembering one's first love and repenting of the deeds that are done without it.

SESSION 3: RETURN TO PRAYER

NEHEMIAH 1:3-10

Nehemiah 1:3 Commentary

If ever a group of people needed to awaken to a renewed life, it was the people of God in the time of Nehemiah. The Book of Nehemiah covers events that took place from 455 B.C. to sometime after 433 B.C. The people of Judah had fallen into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. Then in 539 B.C., Babylon fell to the Persians. Cyrus, the king of Persia, allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, where they began the task of rebuilding the fallen city of Jerusalem. Through the leadership of Haggai and Zechariah, the Jews completed rebuilding the temple in 515 B.C., but by Nehemiah's time they still had not rebuilt the wall surrounding Jerusalem—a huge problem for the defense of the city against its enemies.

Nehemiah was a Jewish man who chose to remain in Babylon after the decree of Cyrus. He was cupbearer for Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. The cupbearer did more than merely serve wine at the king's table and protect him from poisoning. He was present regularly in the royal court and often had the king's ear to influence imperial decisions. A delegation of Nehemiah's people came from Jerusalem to ask him to use his influence with the king to relieve the sufferings of God's people.

[VERSE 3] The **great trouble and disgrace** reported to Nehemiah by the delegation included the desperate conditions within the city as well as the scorn of their enemies occasioned by the Jews' inability to defend themselves (see 2:17; 4:1-4). **Jerusalem's wall**, now **broken down**, was the fortification around the city to protect it from invading enemies and other marauders. The **gates** now **burned down** were the fortified entrances into the city. Enemies seeking entrance into the city usually focused their assault on these gates.

Ezra, a contemporary of Nehemiah, had arrived in Jerusalem 13 years before Nehemiah's arrival. Sometime after Ezra's arrival, the Jews attempted to rebuild the wall and to repair the foundations of the city (see Ezra 4:12). But Rehum and Shimshai the scribe, the Persian officials with oversight of the Trans-Euphrates territory, interpreted the Jews' actions as rebellion. When the work was reported to King Artaxerxes as rebellion, he issued a decree to stop the rebuilding of the city and to begin anew only at his decree (see v. 21).

Clearly, one of the most important lessons in the Book of Nehemiah is found in observing how Nehemiah responded to the tragic news he heard about Jerusalem. First, Nehemiah did not blame God for the condition of Jerusalem, its walls, or its gates. Second, he did not conclude that God was incapable of doing anything about it. Third, Nehemiah did not give up in despair, doubting that God was willing to deal with this horrible problem. Fourth, he did not take matters into his own hands and try to figure out how he could fix the situation on his own. None of these would be responses of faith.

Nehemiah 1:4-6a Commentary

[VERSE 4] Nehemiah responded to the distressing news he received by seeking God through prayer and fasting. Upon hearing the devastating news, he gave himself to thoughtful, prayerful consideration of what he had learned. At first, Nehemiah **sat down and wept**. Then for days he **mourned** while also **fasting and praying**. This fasting and praying may have lasted the three or four months between his hearing the news and his going before the king and requesting permission to rebuild Jerusalem (see Neh. 2:1). In his mourning, Nehemiah abstained from food to make himself more sensitive to his peoples' need and to God's will.

[VERSE 5] Nehemiah didn't start his prayer by acknowledging the need. Rather, he went right to the Person who could meet the need. He began by addressing God as **Yahweh**, the personal name by which God has revealed Himself. The name probably means "the One who causes to be." By proclaiming Him to be **Yahweh, the God of heaven**, Nehemiah affirmed God's universal sovereignty. His prayer revealed both the depth of his fervor and the depth of his relationship with the living God.

Nehemiah also acknowledged God's character. The God he worshiped was **great and awe-inspiring**, the sovereign Lord of the universe. The Hebrew word translated **keeps** also means "watch" or "guard." Nehemiah knew he could count on God to honor the terms of His **covenant** with Israel, for God kept His promises with perfect faithfulness (see Mic. 7:20). The Hebrew word translated **gracious** (*chesed*) is a rich theological word. It denotes at various times God's loyalty, faithfulness, grace, lovingkindness, and covenant love. The words **those who love Him and keep His commands** call to mind Exodus 20:6, where God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. We may reasonably suppose Nehemiah's words referred to the covenant God ratified with Israel at Mount Sinai. By invoking God's own words, Nehemiah was reminding himself of God's past faithfulness while he was seeking God's faithfulness in the present.

[VERSE 6a] Next, Nehemiah pleaded for God to turn His attention to His people. The Babylonian exile was a time God had turned His face away from His people (see Isa. 54:8). Now, however, Nehemiah called on the Lord to look at and listen to His people once again. Nehemiah's **prayer** was not a one-time petition; rather, he offered his prayer to God **day and night**. What great works would you and your church like to see God do? Are you willing to pray day and night to see them happen? After all, we are God's covenant people, too, and God has promised to hear our prayers.

The request Nehemiah brought before the Lord was based on sure and certain promises God Himself had made. Nehemiah was confident that God is utterly true to His Word.

Nehemiah 1:6b-10 Commentary

[VERSE 6b] Nehemiah not only acknowledged God's character and pleaded for God to turn His attention to His people (Neh. 1:6a); he also confessed his and the people's sins. The words **both I and my father's house** confirm Nehemiah's own confession of his personal sins. There was no self-righteousness here. Some in the prophet Ezekiel's days suggested the exile occurred because of Israel's ancestors' sins (see Ezek. 18:2), but Nehemiah knew each generation bore some responsibility for the exile. No one was without sin!

[VERSE 7] Nehemiah identified their sin as having **acted corruptly** toward God. This phrase emphasizes a strong defiance of God's **commands** given through His **servant Moses**, which would be the Ten Commandments. These commands provide fundamental and abiding principles for living. God's **statutes** and **ordinances** were the additional laws that provided specific applications of the Ten Commandments to certain areas of life. God gave His laws as an act of grace to point to a better way of life and to steer from hurtful behavior. In disobeying these laws, the Israelites brought ruin to themselves and to their city.

[VERSES 8-9] Nehemiah paraphrased God's promises through **Moses** to His people Israel in passages such as Leviticus 26:3-45. God promised blessings for obedience and chastisements for disobedience. God had warned that the people's **unfaithful** attitudes and actions would lead to their exile **among the peoples**. God also had warned the Israelites of this danger during the time of Moses, prior to their taking the land of Canaan (see Lev. 26:33; Deut. 28:63-64). However, the Lord also held out hope. The phrase **return to Me** meant doing what God had commanded. The Hebrew word translated *return* also can mean "repent." God had told His people to **carefully observe** His **commands** because obedience provided the clearest evidence of genuine repentance. The expression **the place where I chose to have My name dwell** designates Jerusalem, God's holy city and Israel's capital.

[VERSE 10] Nehemiah asked God to remember that the Israelites now destitute in Judah were His own people whom God had **redeemed** from Egypt to serve Him. The words **Your servants and Your people** designate the Israelites and again emphasize God's covenant relationship with them. Nehemiah's prayer ends with an interesting and important twist. Notice, he did not merely call on God to "be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and to that of Your servants who delight to revere Your name" (Neh. 1:11a); but, he added, "Give Your servant success today, and have compassion on him in the presence of this man" (v. 11). Let's not miss this: Nehemiah shifted from simply thinking in terms of what God (alone) would do to fulfill this promise to how God might use Nehemiah as part of the answer to his own prayer. This was faith in action.

SESSION 4: RETURN TO GOD'S WORD

NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

Nehemiah 8:1-3 Commentary

The previous session introduced us to Nehemiah, who organized a rebuilding project that allowed the people to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem in only 52 days (see 6:15). Having secured the borders of the city and buoyed by the confidence of completing the building project, the people turned their attention to the more important matter of spiritual renewal. This forms the background of a great event in Nehemiah 8 when the people gathered together to hear the public reading of the Scriptures.

[VERSE 1] The completion of the wall occurred on the 25th day of the sixth month on the Jewish calendar (see v. 15), and the events of Nehemiah 8 occur on the first day of the seventh month. As soon as their borders were secure, they had the time and energy to focus on spiritual awakening.

The people gathered at **the square in front of the Water Gate**. This gate in the wall, leading to the Gihon Spring, was a popular point in community life. But the people did not gather there merely to socialize. They asked **Ezra the scribe** to **bring the book of the law of Moses** to read to the crowd. Nehemiah emphasized the desire among **all the people** to hear the Word of God. The people took the initiative. They called for the reading of the Word of God.

[VERSE 2] The **first day of the seventh month** was the New Year's Day of the Jewish civil calendar. It included the celebration of the Feast of Trumpets with a solemn assembly of both men and women as they ceased from their labor to focus on the coming year. Perhaps in years past this holy day had not been observed as it should because of fear the uncompleted wall made them vulnerable to their enemies. With the wall intact, they gathered to hear the Word of God. Without personal copies, they relied on the priests to read the Scripture to them. Ezra was **the priest** chosen to read. He was a descendant of Aaron who was sent to Jerusalem by King Artaxerxes of Persia in 458 B.C. He was a leader of renewal among God's people, and they had great respect for him.

[VERSE 3] Ezra read **the book of the law** to the assembly. Though this may refer only to the legal material in Moses' writings, it probably referred to the entire Pentateuch—Genesis through Deuteronomy. The neglect of the Scriptures had occurred because of captivity, trials, and apathy. Therefore, the people needed to hear the whole counsel of God. The crowd included **the men, the women, and those who could understand**. Though men regularly should have heard the Word of God, this was not the case among the exiles who had returned. The women participated in some special observances on solemn occasions (see Deut. 31:12; Josh. 8:35; 2 Kings 23:2). The phrase *who could understand* would have applied to all the children who were of an age to comprehend God's Word. These were children old enough to understand what they heard.

Nehemiah 8:4-6 Commentary

[VERSE 4] The people had made preparations for the reading of God's Word. They built a **high wooden platform** from which Ezra could read the Scriptures to them. The platform would have aided in both visual and auditory purposes. Reading the Bible is an important part of sustained spiritual renewal. A renewal movement not centered on the Word of God will quickly run off track. We need to read Scripture regularly, allowing it to search us and push us to seek God's will.

[VERSE 5] Though the English translation indicates that **Ezra opened the book**, he actually unrolled the scroll. This is further indication that Ezra was not picking portions of the Scriptures to read. Rather, he was systematically reading the entire Scriptures to the people who were starving to hear it. Ezra opened the scroll **in full view of all the people**.

The visual image of the priest of God reading the Word of God was important to the people. They had elevated the platform for visual and auditory reasons, but it also was symbolic of their respect for the Scriptures. The people were not taking this as some casual reading of the Scriptures for the sake of acquiring more knowledge. They were reorienting their lives to the truths

they heard from God. This is why all the people **stood up**. The act of standing for the reading of the Word of God was a sign of great respect.

[VERSE 6] Notice that as Ezra read the Scriptures, he **praised the Lord**. The word used for *praise* in this passage literally means “to bless” through praise or through a spoken blessing. Certainly this was an indication that Ezra respected the Word of God. He recognized that the ancient words were not devoid of meaning or power. These were the words of **the great God**. The Old Testament frequently referred to the greatness of God (see Deut. 10:17; Neh. 9:32; Jer. 32:18; Dan. 9:4). The adjective *great* in Hebrew describes something that is large or stands above something else.

The people responded in three ways that demonstrated their respect for the authority of God’s Word. First, they had their **hands uplifted**. The lifting of the hands was an outward symbol of worship and prayer. As the people heard the Word of God read, they began to worship and commune with God. Second, the people cried out, **“Amen, Amen!”** as they heard the Word of God. By doing so, they were repeating an expression that indicated their submission to the authority of the Word. By repeating it twice, they were doubly emphasizing the importance of the words they heard. Third, the people **bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground**. The word for *bowed down* occurs 15 times in the Old Testament; it is always followed by the verb *to worship*. Bowing with their faces to the ground illustrated their humility and reverence for the Word of God.

Nehemiah 8:7-8 Commentary

[VERSE 7] Ezra not only read the Scripture, he also wanted to make sure the people understood accurately what they were hearing. The Scripture needed to be **explained**. Why? The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and these people had spent their entire lives in a foreign country where Hebrew was not the official language. There was likewise a cultural gap between them and the Hebrew Scriptures. They may have needed help understanding the cultural customs reflected in the Scripture.

To ensure that the people understood the Scripture, thirteen **Levites** assisted Ezra by explaining the law. They helped bridge the cultural gap between the Babylonian captivity and their return to Jerusalem. Eight of the thirteen expositors would later participate in the public confession of the people (see Neh. 9:3-5), and at least nine of them signed the covenant (10:9-13). The phrase ***as they stood in their places*** may indicate that they moved among the crowd as Ezra read, ensuring that all could understand the Scripture. This could have meant that the law was read in manageable segments so that people could grasp each section and ask questions as they needed fuller understanding.

[VERSE 8] Verse 8 explains how the Levites accomplished the task of explaining the Word of God. As Ezra read aloud the Word of God, the Levites were involved in **translating** the Word so that the people could understand it. ***Translating*** comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to break up or to break down into small units.” It is a difficult word to understand. Some people think that this verb meant that they were breaking the Scriptures down into smaller units so that the people could understand them. Following this interpretation, the expositors broke the Scriptures down into small units to explain them.

Another interpretation of *translating* is that the Levites were providing an Aramaic translation for the Jews since they no longer had a grasp of Hebrew as they once did. The scrolls Ezra used would have been written in Hebrew, and the people were now speaking Aramaic. Many would have needed a translation of the reading into their own language. The Levites broke the Hebrew texts down into manageable fragments in Aramaic. Without the translations, the people would not have had a good understanding of the Scripture. Today, translations are helpful for people to understand the text.

In addition to translating the Word of God, the Levites were **giving the meaning** of the words that Ezra read. This is the word for the Hebrew *midrash*. It comes from the Hebrew verb meaning “to seek with care, to inquire, or to require.” Unlike later definitions of *midrash*, which included fanciful attempts of explaining the text, the term here referred to simple explanations of the texts heard by the Jews gathered at the Water Gate. The Levites were there to make sure that those who heard the Word could understand it in their own language and in their own context.

SESSION 5: RETURN TO UNITY

ACTS 4:31-37

Acts 4:31 Commentary

The Book of Acts details the beginnings of the early church. Jesus had told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they were empowered by the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). The proclamation of the gospel would not depend on their own passion or ability to share it, but on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples obeyed and gathered in one place to await God's sending of the Holy Spirit. When the day of Pentecost arrived, the Holy Spirit came upon them as Jesus had promised, and 3,000 people came to faith in Christ through Peter's preaching. In Acts 4:4 we're told that an additional 5,000 men came to faith in Christ through Peter's preaching at the temple.

As the apostles continued to preach and large numbers of people continued to be saved, those responsible for Jesus' death among the Jewish authorities felt threatened. They arrested Peter and John and ordered them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus (see 4:18-20). Instead, the apostles prayed for boldness to continue preaching the gospel (see vv. 23-31).

[VERSE 31] This verse is the direct answer to the apostles' prayer for boldness in Acts 4:29-30, which is why it begins with the words **when they had prayed**. The first sign that God had heard their prayer was that **the place where they were assembled was shaken**. Shaking ground in the Old Testament indicated that God was uniquely present in a given situation. For example, in Exodus 19:18, "the whole mountain shook violently" when God appeared on Mount Sinai to speak to Moses. In Isaiah 6:4, the "foundations of the doorways shook" as the prophet encountered God in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died. By appearing to the apostles with the shaking of the earth, God gave them tangible evidence that He was present and that He would answer their prayers.

A second evidence of God answering prayer was that everyone in the room was **filled with the Holy Spirit**. This was not a second Pentecost, which was the pouring out of the Spirit on the apostles in answer to Jesus' command for them to wait for power from on high. However, this filling of the Spirit was a fresh empowerment of the disciples for their witness to the world.

The direct result of the Spirit's filling in Acts 4:31 was that the disciples **began to speak God's message with boldness**. The word *boldness* in secular usage often indicated the idea of freedom of speech or being willing to say anything in candor. The disciples' prayer for boldness was not merely a desire that they would not be afraid to speak God's message, but that they would have a freedom to publicly declare the gospel to those who needed to hear it. Their boldness was directly tied to their proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Acts 4:32-33 Commentary

[VERSE 32] This verse begins with a reference to the **large group of those who believed**. Luke widened the circle from the apostles and disciples of the upper room at Pentecost to all those who had believed in Jesus. As the circle of believers grew, the unity they shared in Christ remained strong. Luke described this unity as being **of one heart and mind**.

Some scholars have described this as fulfilling the Greek ideal of common ownership of property and everything held in common, which reached back to the ideals of the Pythagoreans and Plato. In reality, these early believers were simply responding to the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives. How do we know the disciples were not creating a utopian society where everything was held in common? The phrasing of the verse helps make this clear. The attitude of the body of believers was that **no one said that any of his possessions was his own**. The key is that the possessions were still their own, even though they did not count them as so. In a communal or utopian society, private possessions become the property of all. Luke clearly indicated that the believers voluntarily

gave up what was still their own possessions. The church did not nullify the right to own private property. Each person continued to own property until it was found to be necessary to sell it for the common good, and even then it was a voluntary decision.

[VERSE 33] The presence of the Holy Spirit, the unity of the believers, and the concern that they showed for one another enhanced the proclamation of the gospel by the **apostles**. While all the believers were giving evidence of their faith in Jesus, the apostles explained the gospel from the Old Testament Scriptures through preaching. The preaching of the apostles was described as their **testimony**. In legal terms, this referred to a person's testimony as a witness in a court of law. As witnesses to the ministry of Jesus, the apostles spoke with authority about His life, death, and resurrection.

Luke described the preaching of the apostles as occurring **with great power**. The Greek word for *power* comes from the root *to be able*. The English word *dynamite* comes from the same root. When used of the disciples, this power indicated the presence of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 24:48-49) and the miracles that the apostles did (see Acts 4:7). The specific content of the apostles' preaching was the **resurrection of the Lord Jesus**. They had witnessed the life of Jesus and they had also seen Him die. However, what set their message apart was their witness to the resurrected Jesus. Christ had come back to life. They saw Him alive after He had died. The result of the apostles' witness was that **great grace was on all of them**. God blessed their witness and many new believers came to faith. As they came to faith, they grew in unity as a new community of believers.

Acts 4:34-37 Commentary

[VERSES 34-35] The phrase **there was not a needy person among them** clearly refers back to the ideal of Deuteronomy 15:4. The members of the church who had means voluntarily met the needs of poorer members by sacrificing their own ownership of property to help the poor. This provision started as the believers **sold** their land. The fact that they sold it voluntarily must be emphasized. The remarkable quality of the early believers was their generosity and their sacrifice, which created a strong sense of community and fostered unity among the group.

After selling their land, the people brought the **proceeds** and **laid them at the apostles' feet**. Since this was voluntary, the emphasis was not on the apostles' authority to receive the funds but their God-given responsibility to use it wisely in caring for the needs of the poor in the community. Specifically, the apostles **distributed** the proceeds **for each person's basic needs**. The tense of the verbs (imperfect tense) throughout this passage indicate a continual process, not a one-time occurrence. The church did not decide one day that everyone should sell all property and bring the proceeds to the apostles. As the poor had need, believers were selling, laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet, and the disciples were distributing the proceeds.

[VERSES 36-37] Luke highlighted two types of people involved in the process. He positively spoke of **Joseph**, also known as **Barnabas**. Negatively, he told the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who sold their land but lied about the proceeds (see 5:1-11). Barnabas would later appear as a companion of Paul on the missionary journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor. Luke also referred to Barnabas as a **Levite**, which might confuse the reader at first because they were not able to own land in the early days of the Old Testament (Deut. 10:9; Num. 18:20,24). However, that probably did not apply in the days of Acts because the priestly families of Jeremiah had owned land earlier (Jer. 32:6-15). The sacrifice of Barnabas highlighted the meaning of his name, **Son of Encouragement**.

Like others in the Christian community, Barnabas **brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet**. Rather than helping others on his own, he did so through the ministry of the local body of believers in his community. He did not give his money to the church, but through the church. He trusted that the apostles would not keep the money for themselves, but that they would distribute the money as needs had arisen among them.

As the early church experienced opposition, they prayed for boldness to continue preaching. With the common purpose of winning their world to Christ, the church grew stronger in unity and sacrificially helped one another as needs arose.

SESSION 6: RETURN TO THE TASK

ACTS 13:1-3, 44-52

Acts 13:1-3 Commentary

Because of the persecution in Jerusalem, believers scattered across the known world, preaching the gospel as they went (see Acts 11:19). When the Jerusalem church heard about a new congregation in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to check on them (see Acts 11:22). Barnabas became a leader in the church there and eventually brought Saul to minister with him (see 11:25-26). This community of faith in Antioch became instrumental in spreading the gospel all over the world.

[VERSE 1] This passage lists five leaders in the church at Antioch who were designated as **prophets and teachers**. The gift of prophecy can be that of foretelling the future, like Agabus in Acts 11:27-28, but more often prophecy was the speaking of an inspired word from God to build up His people. Teachers interpreted the Scriptures and explained their implications for the lives of believers.

Barnabas was among the leaders in the Antioch church. So was **Simeon who was called Niger** [NIGH guhr]. His surname, *Niger*, meant “black,” leading most scholars to suggest he had dark skin and came from African descent. A third leader, **Lucius the Cyrenian** [sigh REE nih uhn], came from the city of Cyrenaica in northern Africa. **Manaen** [MAN uh en], **a close friend of Herod the tetrarch**, was also a leader in the church at Antioch. He would have had exposure to both Jewish and Gentile culture as the close friend of Herod Antipas. **Saul** was the persecutor of the church who met Jesus on the Damascus road. With this group of multicultural leaders, God was preparing the church for the task of reaching the world for Christ.

[VERSE 2] God revealed this important task in the context of a worship encounter with Him. The term translated **ministering to the Lord** is one of the words for worship that literally means “serving the Lord.” In the Old Testament it referred to the people of God carrying out their duties before Him. In addition to worshiping, the congregation was **fasting**. The association of worship with fasting indicated that the people were involved in an intense time of devotion with the Lord and seeking the will of God. Luke clearly indicated the **Holy Spirit** spoke to the congregation during this time of worship. Whether He spoke in a supernatural way or through one of the prophets is not indicated, but everyone in the church recognized His voice. He told the church to **set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul**. The church at Antioch had to be willing to give up two of its key leaders for the benefit of the proclamation of the gospel elsewhere. They were to set them aside for the work He had called them to do.

[VERSE 3] The church prepared the two missionaries for service by fasting, praying, and laying their hands on them. The laying on of hands likely was meant as a commissioning and setting them apart for this task. The church invoked God’s favor on the missionary candidates and then **sent them off**.

Acts 13:44-47 Commentary

After the church at Antioch prayed for Barnabas and Paul and sent them out to preach the gospel, the two missionaries began a mission that took them first to Barnabas’ home country of Cyprus (see 13:4-12). From there they traveled north to the region of Asia Minor, ending up in another city named Antioch (see v. 14). Antioch Pisidia, located 100 miles north of the coast, was a Roman colony that served as the governing and military center of the southern region of Galatia. The town was cosmopolitan for its day. It also contained a strong Jewish population that was instrumental in the events of Acts 13:44-47.

[VERSE 44] On the next **Sabbath**, a surprise awaited the Jews who gathered together. **Almost the whole town** had gathered to hear the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. Though Antioch Pisidia had a significant Jewish population, the Gentiles vastly outnumbered them. As the Jews arrived that day, many Gentiles also crowded the place to hear the message. Certainly this did not sit well with the Jews because Paul preached a gospel that was inclusive of the Gentiles. God wanted to save the Gentiles as well as the Jews. **The message of the Lord**, the gospel of Jesus Christ, was for both Jew and Gentile.

[VERSE 45] When the Jews saw the **crowds** of Gentiles, they were **filled with jealousy**. The English word *zeal* comes from this Greek word translated *jealousy*. Though it can mean passionate commitment in a positive sense, it often described those who opposed the gospel. Paul himself had this same attitude before his conversion (see Gal. 1:14). The Jews were upset about far more than a crowd invading their personal space in the synagogue. They felt threatened that Paul and Barnabas were preaching the gospel to the Gentiles and leading them to faith in Christ. This jealousy inside led to opposition outside. The Jews began to **oppose** Paul's preaching of the gospel by **insulting him**.

[VERSE 46] In spite of the attempt to discredit Paul and Barnabas, they continued to preach **boldly**. They stood against their opposition by pointing out the error in the Jews' attitude. Paul noted that **God's message**, the gospel, had been preached to the Jews **first**. God did not choose the Jews so they could be exclusive. He gave them the privilege of hearing so they could evangelize their Gentile neighbors. Instead, they decided to **reject it**. By refusing the gospel of Jesus Christ, they proved that they were **unworthy of eternal life**. Therefore, Paul decided to **turn to the Gentiles**.

[VERSE 47] To provide justification for his ministry to the Gentiles, Paul quoted Isaiah 49:6. This was a scriptural reminder of why God had chosen the Jews in the first place. God made them to be **a light for the Gentiles**. They never existed merely for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the nations (see Gen. 12:1-3). Through a small, seemingly insignificant nation, God would **bring salvation to the ends of the earth**.

Acts 13:48-52 Commentary

[VERSE 48] The people in Antioch Pisidia responded in two ways to the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. First, when the **Gentiles heard** that the gospel was for them, they **rejoiced and glorified the message of the Lord**. As they heard the preaching about Jesus' death and resurrection, the people who had been **appointed to eternal life believed**. This verse reflects a remarkable balance between human volition and divine providence.

[VERSE 49] The gospel message **spread through the whole region**. Cities surrounding Antioch Pisidia began to hear the good news of Jesus, and many became curious about this teaching. The *whole region* was primarily made up of Gentiles, though Jewish communities existed in those cities as well. This created a lot of tension in the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Many Gentiles later expressed faith in Jesus, while some Jews opposed the preaching of the gospel.

[VERSE 50] While the Gentiles openly embraced the gospel, the Jews **incited the prominent women and leading men of the city** to stir up opposition against Paul and Barnabas. They could not prevent the Gentiles from trusting in Christ, but they could force the missionaries to leave. The plan worked and they began to stir up **persecution** against Paul and Barnabas. The disciples were **expelled** from Antioch Pisidia. This same persecution would await them in cities all across Asia Minor.

[VERSE 51] How did Paul and Barnabas respond to the persecution? They **shook the dust off their feet**. They followed the words of Jesus, who encouraged the disciples to leave an unreceptive town and shake the dust off their feet (see Matt. 10:14; Luke 10:11). It was customary for Jews to shake the dust off of their feet as they left a pagan place and returned to their homeland. However, for a Jew to do this to fellow Jews was to regard them as pagan Gentiles. The irony of this action was that by rejecting the gospel that was available even to the Gentiles, the Jews were placing themselves in the spiritual position of the Gentiles—lost people who needed a Savior. Rather than continuing to serve in Antioch Pisidia, the disciples left for **Iconium**. The journey involved a walk of 90 miles southeast.

[VERSE 52] Paul and Barnabas' departure to Iconium did not leave the new converts discouraged. These new believers were not followers of Paul and Barnabas. They were **disciples** of Jesus Christ. Instead of being discouraged, the new converts were **filled with joy**. This joy was not dependent on circumstances. They had a source of joy inside of themselves: **the Holy Spirit**. As new believers, they had experienced the indwelling power of the Spirit, and He had filled them with joy (Gal. 5:22-23). Paul and Barnabas, who also may have been numbered with the disciples, also went with joy. Even though they experienced persecution, they knew God was working and bringing people to faith.