

**WORD SENSE**

NEHEMIAH 8:5-8 | 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. <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. <sup>7</sup> The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, (and) Pellaiah—helped the people to understand the Law while the people remained in their places. <sup>8</sup> And they read from the Book of the Law of God paragraph by paragraph giving the sense, and so they understood the reading.

**T**he Levites get a second chance. Pre-exile, they fell short of their calling as teachers of

God's Word to Israel. Consequently, they were singled out for special punishment during the exile (EZE 44:10-12; HOS 4:1-6). But now, postexile, they are given the opportunity to make amends and fulfil their mission. Thanks be to God.

And thanks to Ezra. He reads the Word to all the people all morning long. He is supported by 13 laymen and 13 Levites. Thus the line between clergy and laity is blurred. But not obliterated: *The people remained in their places. And the Levites rose up to theirs: They helped the people to understand the Law of God* (:7). Bless you, Levites!

This is a sacred moment in the history of biblical faith. It marks the birth of expository preaching, which allows Scripture to speak for itself with minimum distortion by the preacher. The Word of God can never be changed or outdated. But its original meanings must be skilfully reinterpreted and carefully applied in fresh ways to every generation.

A thousand years on from the giving of the Law, the Levites arise to perform their solemn and sacred duty. *They read from the Book of the Law of God paragraph by paragraph*

*giving the sense, and so the people understood the reading.* The response was overwhelming. All the people wept *as they listened to the words of the Law.* Thanks be to God! And God bless the Levites.

Where have all the Ezras gone? And where are the Levites who teach God's Word *paragraph by paragraph*? Not hopscotching from text to topic with no sense of context. Paul wrote to Timothy, *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth* (2 TIM 2:15). To *rightly handle* literally means to *cut it straight*.

Don't fiddle and twiddle with trendy topics that tickle ears (2 TIM 4:3). Let the Scripture speak for itself. Let the text be the starting point, the mid-point, and the end-point. Please. *Cut it straight!*

**WALL OF DUTY**

■ We have much to steward. *Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching* (2 TIM. 4:2). *Every season of reformation and every hour of spiritual awakening has been ushered in by a recovery of biblical preaching. This cause and effect is timeless and inseparable.... As the pulpit goes, so goes the church* (STEVEN LAWSON).

■ We have lots to celebrate. Thank God for religious freedom in Singapore, not only to profess and practise our faith, but also to preach and propagate Truth according to God's Word. Thank God for gifting the Singapore Church with biblical expositors who preach the pure Word of God with integrity and excellence. Name those you know. Thank God for each one. Pray that they will make many disciples and groom many successors who will surpass them in every way.

■ We have cause for concern. In our attempt to be relevant and contemporary, some of us who preach often leap from a Bible text into our topic without drawing richly from the text itself. We string up illustrations and anecdotes. We dish out personal opinions. We throw in a joke or two. But we rarely return to the text. Pray for preachers and teachers to 'cut

it straight'—*rightly dividing the Word of Truth* (2 TIM 2:15 NKJV). *Precept upon precept, line upon line* (ISA 28:10).

■ We have much to repent of. We peddle a feel-good Gospel. We hold back from calling out sin by its name for fear of offending carnal Christians and alienating liberals. We send wrong signals. We cannot expect sinners or saints to grasp the sense of the Word, be challenged, convicted, and repent if we do not let the Word speak for itself! The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of Truth (JOHN 16:8,13). He will not anoint preachers of half-truths and untruths, no matter how charming they may be. Pray.

■ We have great need of revival. In this heart-wrenching pandemic, we need to hear God's Truth, understand God's Truth, proclaim God's Truth, and obey God's Truth more than ever before! With great love for Christ and his Body, pray for a *cut-it-straight*, cut-to-the-heart (ACTS 2:37) renewal of preaching across all church streams. Declare with the Prince of Preachers: *I would rather speak five words out of this Book than 50,000 words of the philosophers. If we want revival, we must revive our reverence for the Word of God* (CHARLES SPURGEON). Ask for divine discontent with the status quo. And a holy hunger for a steady diet of biblical preaching with sound interpretation and solid application.

■ We have much to pray for. Be an advocate, not an adversary. Stand in the gap for our hardworking pastors, overwhelmed and overstretched, especially in the pandemic. Some wear too many hats and have too little time for the hidden work of prayer, study, and sermon preparation. Ask God to help them give away some hats. Pray that their church boards, church staff, and congregations will allow them ample space to devote themselves to *prayer and the ministry of the Word* (ACTS 6:4). *He who has ceased to learn has ceased to teach. He who no longer sows in the study will no more reap in the pulpit* (STEVEN LAWSON).