

# “All Rise.”

Ezra 7:8-10 <sup>1</sup>

One of the first things I learned in the Navy nearly fifty years ago was how to respond to the cry, “Attention on Deck!” That cry, uttered by the first person to notice the Captain’s approach, brought everyone to their feet and to attention in deference to the presence of the Commanding Officer. I suspect that the other services have their own ways of doing the same thing; indeed, even civilian courtesies bring us to our feet when in the presence of our superiors, or when making ordinary introductions.

In synagogue services, worshipers stand while the Torah is being read, and in some Christian churches, the congregation stands while Scripture is being read. The book that claims our attention this morning is the book of Nehemiah, and the primary reference for the practice of standing while God’s Word is read is found in Nehemiah 8:

*Then all the people were brought as a single body into the plaza that was before the Water Gate. They said to Ezra the scribe, “Bring out the Torah scroll of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.”*

*Ezra the scribe brought the Torah before the assembly, which included men and women and all who could understand what they heard. . . . [He] stood on a high wooden platform constructed for this purpose. . . . Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people for he was above all the people. When he opened it, all the people stood up (Nehemiah 8:1-2, 4-5).*

Let me remind you of the context for this scene. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., after which most of its surviving inhabitants had been exiled to the vicinity of Babylon. When the Persians conquered the Babylonians, a large group of Jewish exiles were permitted to return home in 539 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel. This group began the reconstruction of the Temple.

Eighty years later, another group of exiles returned in 458 B.C. under the leadership of Ezra, and then, thirteen years later, Nehemiah came to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a Jewish exile who had risen to high position in the court of Artaxerxes I, the Emperor of Persia, in what we know today as Iran. Although the repatriates in Palestine had rebuilt the Temple, their failure to repair the protective walls of Jerusalem left them vulnerable to their hostile neighbors.

With the Emperor’s blessing, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C. Marshalling the people to concerted effort, Nehemiah was able to get the walls back to passable shape in just fifty-two days of herculean labor “*from the first light of dawn until the stars came out*” (Nehemiah 4:21).

Our text from Nehemiah 8 takes up the story on October 8 of the year 445 B.C. The rebuilding of the wall of the city of Jerusalem had been completed during the previous week, and the people asked Ezra the scribe to “*bring out the [Torah scroll] of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey*” (8:1). A high wooden platform had been built for the occasion of this reading, and “*Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. **When they saw him open the [scroll], they all rose to their feet***” (8:5).<sup>2</sup>

Something similar happened in Judges 3, but on that occasion the rising had to do with a spoken word from God rather than a written one. When the prophet Ehud visited King Eglon of

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 27, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See also Exodus 19:17, 20:21; Leviticus 9:5; 1 Kings 8:22; 2 Chronicles 20:13; Daniel 2:2; Luke 4:16.

Moab and said, “*I have a message from God for you!*” King Eglon rose from his seat in deference to this divine announcement (3:20).<sup>3</sup>

Now the truth of the matter is that the Bible gives no instruction about how it is to be physically read. The important thing in hearing or reading God’s Word is the attitude of our hearts, not the position of our bodies. I’m not going to recommend that we always stand during the reading of Scripture, though I’m certainly not opposed to that practice, and I’ve followed it in other places. I eventually stopped having congregations stand for the reading of Scripture for two reasons: (1) standing is difficult for some of us; and (2) I’d rather have you sit with your own Bible open in your lap.

Let me say again that the crucial thing in our approach to Scripture is the attitude of our hearts, not the position of our bodies; but in a culture that is fast losing any real concept of things authoritative and sacred, we do well to remind ourselves about the significance of God’s Word to us. Even if we’re seated, it’s important that we bring an appropriate mindset to the reading of Scripture, so for the next few minutes I’m going to talk about the nature of God’s Book that you have in your hand—or could have in your hand if you wished to.

God is very clear that He wants us to know Him. Jeremiah wrote that *This is what the Lord says: “Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. <sup>24</sup> But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things”* (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

While the Bible’s chief purpose is to guide us to personal relationship with our Creator, God’s character and purposes must necessarily be revealed to us in ways that are suited to what we can understand, and our own limitations require that these revelations are always partial and incomplete. As God said through Isaiah, “*My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,*” says the Lord. “*And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine*” (Isaiah 55:8).

Let’s think about this as it relates to ordinary human experience. If I want to know you, for example, there are two main avenues for gaining that knowledge. First, I can simply observe you as you move through life. I can watch what you do with your time, what you do with your money, how you seem to choose your friends, and how you spend your free time. That kind of knowledge about you can be rather substantial, and it’s more or less available to anyone who wants it.

But if I want to know you more fully, I have to study your self-disclosure in what you’ve written, such as in books or letters. And if I want to know you deeply, I need to spend time talking with you, perhaps even becoming your friend. That’s how you get to know me, too; and it should be no surprise that these two avenues are also how we come to know God. We might call these two methods of discovery “observation” and “self-disclosure.” In the study of the Bible, we call them “**General Revelation**” and “**Special Revelation.**”

Psalm 19 provides excellent examples of both of these ways of knowing God—those things that are available for anyone to observe and other things that only specific self-disclosure can reveal. Verses 1-6 of Psalm 19 talk about the ways we can know God through creation: *The heavens tell of the glory of God. The skies display his marvelous craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known* (vv. 1-2).

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<sup>3</sup> An example of Jewish practice in New Testament times can be seen in Luke 4:14-21, where Jesus stood to read Scripture and then sat to teach.

Although much about God can be known through General Revelation, God wants a deeper and more intimate relationship with you than that. Besides, we often don't pay much attention to General Revelation. I'm afraid that most of the time, we take it for granted.

So, in contrast to God's general revelation which is available to all people at all times, God's Special Revelation is made available in more specific ways, most usually through the Bible. Psalm 19 reminds us that we can know God much more deeply through what God has caused to be written down: *"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The commandments of the LORD are right, bringing joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are clear, giving insight to life"* (vv. 7-8).<sup>4</sup> And this brings us back to a consideration of the nature of the Bible in your hand.

The Bible is very clear in its claim to be God's written Word. Peter wrote that *"Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God"* (2 Peter 1:20-21).

The word "Bible" comes from the Greek βιβλος ("biblos"), which referred to the outer coat of a reed called papyrus that was used to make "paper." As you no doubt know, the Bible has two parts, called "testaments," which are more accurately called "covenants."<sup>5</sup>

What Christians usually call the "Old Testament" is actually the Jewish Bible, representing the covenant God made with Abraham and with the Jewish people after him. The "New Testament" represents the new, additional covenant God made with those who place their faith in the Messiah promised in the Old Testament—Jesus of Nazareth, God in human flesh.

Although the physical Bible in your hand appears to be one book, the Bible is actually a library of sixty-six books written by nearly forty authors over some 1,400 years . . . and yet this Book tells just one consistent and coherent Story. This overarching Story is the story of Who God is, who we are, what our purpose is, how we messed it up, and how God provides a way for us to reconnect our lives with God's original Purpose.

The original copies of these sixty-six books are called "autographs." We don't have a single one of them, and it seems to me that this is probably intentional on God's part. If we had even one of the autographs, we would be tempted to worship it in the way religious relics of various sorts are worshiped the world over. The very existence of an autograph would prevent the achievement of its real purpose, which is to help us to know and love God.<sup>6</sup>

While we have no autographs, we do have over 5,500 Greek manuscripts of portions of the New Testament, the earliest being only about 50 years from the original (as near as 1969 is to us). Counting all languages, we have about 24,000 early manuscripts of the New Testament, each of which can be checked against the others. Through these cross-checks, and similar ones with the Old Testament, we can be confident that the Bibles in our hands are true to what the authors originally penned.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Special revelation is particular, personal, redemptive, propositional, and progressive. Special revelation comes to us through the Bible, through Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> Technically, these covenants were/are similar to ancient suzerainty treaties, or treaties between greater and lesser parties.

<sup>6</sup> Since I have very little innate sense of direction, I am very fond of GPS, since it helps me to get where I wish to go. The GPS is very useful, but the GPS device itself is not my main concern. In a similar way, the Bible is our **God Positioning System**. We value the Bible because it is effective in guiding us toward a personal relationship with God.

“Well, we may know what the original text said,” you may say, “but how do we know that what that text said was accurate and true?” That’s a very good question, about which a great many books have been written. And, while it’s true that we still have many questions, so many seemingly improbable things in the Bible have been proven to be accurate that fair observers give the presumption of accuracy to the Bible, even if we don’t understand it all at the moment.<sup>ii</sup>

Let me offer a few examples as they relate to Jesus. Professor Simon Greenleaf of Harvard Law School noted that in terms of our normal standards for courtroom witnesses, “There is enough of a discrepancy [between the Gospel accounts] to show that there could have been no previous concert among them; and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same [events].”<sup>7</sup>

Professor Craig Blomberg, an authority on the New Testament documents, noted that “The strongest argument [for the truthfulness of the Gospels] is what we never find in [them]. After Jesus’ ascension there were a number of controversies that threatened the early church—should believers be circumcised, how speaking in tongues should be regulated, how to keep Jew and Gentile united, what are the appropriate roles for women in ministry, whether believers could divorce non-Christian spouses, and others.

“These issues could have been conveniently resolved if the early Christians had simply [put words in Jesus’ mouth to resolve them]. But this never happened. The continuance of these controversies demonstrates that Christians were interested in [making a clear difference] between what [actually] happened during Jesus’ lifetime and what was debated later in the churches.”<sup>8</sup>

Those same Gospels record a number of Jesus’ teachings that are difficult to understand. Interpretation of Jesus’ ministry would be much easier without them. If the Gospels had been written by revisionists who were putting together “fake news” to make their own points and advance their own agendas, they would have deleted such teachings rather than faithfully recording their perplexities. Revisionist gospel writers would certainly have removed the scandal of the crucifixion and put in something more politically helpful; and they would most definitely have painted themselves in a better light than what the Gospels actually record.

Just think about the images of Jesus in Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*.<sup>9</sup> Why would a bloody, lacerated corpse like that inspire anybody? Can you imagine such a bloody corpse inspiring a persistent, worldwide movement of people who hope to someday have a body like that?

Yet within five weeks of the crucifixion, over 5,000 Jewish men (not counting women and children) had professed their faith in this very thing. What sense does it make that these early followers of Jesus got together every week to celebrate the fact that Jesus had been publicly slaughtered in a grotesque and humiliating way? And we still celebrate that today.

Another scholar<sup>10</sup> asked, “Why is there no other first-century Jew who has millions of followers today? Why isn’t there a John the Baptist movement? Why, alone of all first-century figures, including the Roman emperors, is Jesus still worshiped today, while the others have crumbled into the dust of history? It’s because this Jesus—the historical Jesus—is also the living [and eternal] Lord. That’s why. It’s because *He’s still around*, while the others are long gone.”

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Blomberg in Strobel, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*, Newmarket Films, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Professor Ben Witherington

So after all this, I hope it's a bit more clear why we honor the Bible. We don't honor the Bible as though we worshipped it—that would be idolatry. *We honor the Bible because every verse of God's written Word either (1) points forward in some way to Jesus, God's living Word; (2) tells the story of His incarnation, His life on earth; (3) points backward to interpret His incarnation; or (4) points forward to His return. Every bit of it does this.*<sup>11</sup>

My point this morning has to do with honor and reverence for the Word of God, as we see it enacted in our text in Nehemiah. If Jesus were physically or visibly here in this room and we knew it was He, nobody would have to cry out, "Attention on Deck!" Nor would we simply rise to our feet and stand at attention. If we saw—and when we do see—the living Lord Christ, we will fall to our knees or on our faces before His glory, and no one will have to tell us to do it (Philippians 2:9-11; Revelation 4:10, 5:14).

So it is that as King Eglon stood up when God's prophet said "*I have a message from God for you,*" and as the people of Israel stood when they saw Ezra open the scroll of the Law, we, too, grow in grace by showing appropriate respect to the written Word of God. Jesus told us that "*until heaven and earth disappear, even the smallest detail of God's law will remain until its purpose is achieved*" (Matthew 5:18). As it is written, "*The grass withers, and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever*" (Isaiah 40:8).

And for this Written Word that brings us to the Living Word, we give hearty thanks to God!!

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<sup>i</sup> Consider this: Acts had to be written before A.D. 62, because Paul was still alive when it was written. Luke was written before Acts. Mark was written before Luke. This means that Mark was probably written in the 50s, about 25 years after Jesus was crucified (the distance 1994 is from us).

Jesus was crucified on April 3, A.D. 33. Paul's conversion would then have been about A.D. 35, and his first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem would have been about A.D. 38.

The "formula" Paul reports in 1 Corinthians 15 had already been in use for some time prior to his learning it in A.D. 38. This means that these key facts about Jesus' death, together with detailed lists of persons who witnessed the risen Christ, date to less than five years after the events occurred—as near as 2014 is to us now!

<sup>ii</sup> Even without the New Testament, we would know that:

1. Jesus was a Jewish teacher.
2. Many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms.
3. Some people believed he was the Messiah.
4. He was rejected by the Jewish leaders.
5. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius Caesar.
6. Despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by A.D. 64.
7. All kinds of people from the cities and countryside—men and women, slave and free—worshiped him as God.

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<sup>11</sup> Louis Lapidès, now a Messianic Jewish Rabbi, found Isaiah 53 to be so breathtakingly descriptive of Jesus of Nazareth that he first thought that Christians must have somehow twisted Isaiah's words, 700 years after the fact, to make it look as though Isaiah was predicting Jesus. My friend Joe Bell, also a Messianic Rabbi, came to Jesus from Orthodox Judaism through the very same experience. The written Word brought him to the Living Word, and I believe the same thing is true of my friend, Barry Rubin, Rabbi of the oldest Messianic Congregation in the nation, just down the road in Clarksville.