

Nehemiah Chapter 8

Verses 8:1 – 10:39: Until the end of the seventh chapter, the narrative focuses on Nehemiah, the people, and the reconstruction of the wall. Starting here, “Ezra the priest” takes center stage, because the people realized they were missing their spiritual foundation.

Verses 1-4: And “all the people gathered ... together as one man” was a move of God. They came with the right attitude, unified, expectant, prepared to hear the Word and gripped by the need to discover what else God had in store for them. In their spiritual hunger, they called for “Ezra” the priest (“scribe”), who “brought” the Word to them and for their leaders (8:4), to join them. “All who could hear with understanding” include older children, not just adults.

Verses 1-2: “The book of the law”: In response to the people’s request, Ezra brought the law of the Lord, which he had set his heart to study, practice, and teach to the people (compare Ezra 7:10). At this time, the law was a scroll, as opposed to a text consisting of bound pages. Such a reading was required every 7 years at the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles (compare Deut. 31:10-13), even though it had been neglected since the Babylonia captivity until this occasion.

Nehemiah 8:1 "And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that [was] before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel."

“Water Gate” (see note on 3:26).

“Ezra”: This is the first mention of Ezra in the book of Nehemiah, though he had been ministering in Jerusalem since 458 B.C. (compare Ezra 7:1 – 13:44).

By the end of Nehemiah chapter 7, something is wrong in Jerusalem: The Word of God has not been made the center of the spiritual community. The people were rebuilding their city, but they were not rebuilding their hearts. In the thirteen years the people had been back in Jerusalem there is no mention of the centrality of Scripture, until we get to (Nehemiah chapter 8).

This was an awareness of the people that the answers to their problems would be found in God's Word. Oh! if we could come to that conclusion in our land today. Notice the word "all". This means that the entire group, that came back to their homeland, gathered here. The people who came back were those who wanted to be in better relationship with their God. We may remember that those that came, came of their own free will. They had gathered to hear the Word of the LORD from His law.

Nehemiah 8:2 "And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month."

The time was the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24), and was about September 27, 444 B.C. This was the most sacred of the new moons, and commenced the final month of religious festivals

(Lev. 23:23-25; Num. 29:1-6). The concept of “understanding” was important as (Prov. 1:2), indicates (compare Exodus 12:26-27; Deut. 4:6; 6:6-9; 31:12-13). Mindless superstition was the mark of paganism “They have not known nor understood” (Isa. 44:18-20), and had been the downfall of apostate Israel.

Hosea 4:6 “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge”.

Notice the stress on understanding (in verses 2-3, 7-8, 12).

"All that could hear with understanding" was probably speaking of children being in the group, if they were old enough to understand. Ezra was a true priest of God. He restricted no one from hearing the law read.

Verses 3-8: The people were “attentive (“all the people stood up”), responsive (“Amen, Amen”), and demonstrative (“lifting up their hands ... bowed their heads”).

Nehemiah 8:3 "And he read therein before the street that [was] before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people [were attentive] unto the book of the law."

“Read ... understand”: Here is the general summary of the event of reading and explaining the Scripture from daybreak to noon, a period of at least 6 hours (more detail is added in verses 4-8).

He read from the first light of morning until noon. This had to be at least 6 hours of reading without a stop. We may safely assume that some of those on the platform with him, read part of it to spare his voice. It is interesting to me, that the reading would last this long. It is even more interesting to me, that the people would listen for this extended time.

Verses 4-5: “Ezra was above all the people” on a platform allowing all the people to see and hear, but it was also an outward expression of the importance of elevating the Word of God. He was in the center of the crowd as he read, exactly where the Word of God ought to be. Any church that wishes to honor the teaching of God’s Word must find a place for hearing it.

Nehemiah 8:4 "And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, [and] Meshullam."

“Pulpit ... beside him”: The platform was big enough to hold 14 people for the long hours of reading and explaining (verse 8). The men, probably priests, stood with Nehemiah to show agreement.

Notice in this, Ezra was spoken of as scribe, as if he was reading a document instead of acting as priest. This pulpit of wood was an elevated platform where all the people could plainly see him reading the Word. The people on his right and left could have been priests, but it would not have been necessary for them to be. They were probably chosen for their reading ability. The idea was, they must be able to accurately read the law.

Nehemiah 8:5 "And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:"

“Stood up”: In respect at the reading of God’s Word, as though they were in the presence of God Himself, the people stood for all the hours of the exposition.

The fact that they stood up, showed great respect for Ezra and for the law he was holding in his hand.

Nehemiah 8:6 "And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with [their] faces to the ground."

“Blessed the LORD”: A praise befitting the reading. In a synagogue, the reading is preceded by a benediction. The response of “Amen, Amen” was an affirmation of what Ezra prayed.

Spiritual renewal and worship are inseparably linked to the Word of God. The people “lifting up their hands expressing their openness to whatever God would do (Lam. 3:41; 1 Tim. 2:8). This should be the spirit of our hearts whenever the Word of God is preached.

Ezra blessing the LORD had to be speaking of high praise coming from the lips of Ezra. The people were in agreement with the praise and said Amen. The lifting up of the hands was a sign of praise lifted to heaven to God. The bowing of the head showed they were humbled before almighty God. They worshipped and praised God in unison with Ezra.

Verses 7-8: Some of the Levites assisted Ezra with the people’s understanding of the Scripture by reading and explaining it.

In verse 7 the men gave the sense of the “law (caused the people to understand”), and then in verses 8 translated or “read ... distinctly” from the Hebrew into Aramaic, the only language some of the people may have understood (compare 13:24; Ezra 4:18). This would be the first mention of what developed as the Targums, or oral paraphrases of the Law, which were later written down.

Nehemiah 8:7 "Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people [stood] in their place."

That is, others of them besides those named. For they seem all to be Levites, unless they can be thought to be priests, and so the Levites are distinguished from them. But the former seems evident from (Neh. 9:4). These also:

"Caused the people to understand the law": As well as Ezra; from whence it is plain that he did not only read the law, but gave the sense of it. Especially where there was any seeming difficulty, and these men were assisting in the same work.

"And the people stood in their place": To hear the law read and explained. They did not move from their first station, but continued in it from morning to noon. They were both attentive and constant.

It appeared these Levites were familiar with the law. When there was a pause in the reading, they expounded the meaning to those who did not understand.

Nehemiah 8:8 "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused [them] to understand the reading."

"Gave the sense": This may have involved translation for people who were only Aramaic speakers in exile, but more likely it means "to break down" the text into its parts so that the people could understand it. This was an exposition or explanation of the meaning and not just translation.

"And caused [them] to understand the reading": In this act of instruction, Ezra's personal commitment to study the law, practice it in his own life, and then teach it (Ezra 7:10), was reflected.

Notice the word "distinctly" which means clearly understood.

Verses 9-12: There were four results from the reading and understanding of God's Word: the people worshiped, mourned, obeyed the instruction to celebrate, and rejoiced by feasting and sharing. Once people hear God's heart, a response will naturally follow.

Nehemiah 8:9 "And Nehemiah, which [is] the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day [is] holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law."

"The Tirshatha" (see note on 5:14).

"Ezra the priest" (compare Ezra 7:11-12, 21; 10:10, 16).

"Wept when they heard the words of the law": When they heard and understood God's law, they understood their violations of it. Not tears of joy, but penitent sorrow (8:10), came forth as they

were grieved by conviction (8:11), over the distressing manifestations of sin in transgressing the Lord's commands and the consequent punishments they had suffered in their captivity.

The Israelites had been without the Word of God for so long that they probably "wept" tears of joy as well as remorse for all the years they had neglected it. As Scripture becomes precious to God's people (1 Sam. 3:1), even the simple reading of it can move them.

Nehemiah was the civil leader. He was the governor. Ezra was the spiritual leader. The people were weeping probably, because they were understanding where they had failed God. It was not suitable on any holy day to weep, so the Levites made them stop weeping. This day was holy unto the LORD.

Verses 10-12: The joy of the LORD is your strength": The event called for a holy day of worship to prepare them for the hard days ahead (compare 12:43), so they were encouraged to rejoice. The words they had heard did remind them that God punishes sin, but also that God blesses obedience. That was reason to celebrate. They had not been utterly destroyed as a nation, in spite of their sin, and were, by God's grace, on the brink of a new beginning. That called for celebration.

Nehemiah 8:10 "Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for [this] day [is] holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Nehemiah the Tirshatha or governor.

"Go your way; to their own houses, and refresh themselves. It being noon, and they had stood many hours attentive to the reading and expounding of the law.

"Eat the fat, and drink the sweet": Not a common meal, but a feast, consisting of the richest provisions, the best of food and liquors.

"And send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared": For the poor, who had no food at home provided for them. The widow, fatherless, and stranger, who at festivals were to partake of the entertainment (Deut. 16:11).

"For this day is holy unto our Lord": Neither be you sorry; confirming what the Levites had said and exhorted to (Neh. 8:9).

"For the joy of the Lord is your strength": To rejoice, as the Lord commanded them on such days as these, was a means both of increasing their bodily strength and their inward strength. And of fitting them the more to perform their duty to God and men with cheerfulness, which sorrow and heaviness made unfit for. And the joy which has the Lord for its object, and comes from him, is the cause of renewing spiritual strength. So as to run and not be weary, walk and not faint, in the ways of God.

This was probably Ezra giving them instructions in spiritual things. Everyone was to eat and be merry on this day. They were to share their food with those who did not have to eat as well. The joy, spoken of here, was in the spirit. This joy was a gift from God, who gave them, and all who dare to believe, His strength.

Nehemiah 8:11 "So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day [is] holy; neither be ye grieved."

Made them quiet and easy, being backed by the governor.

"Saying, hold your peace": Refrain from weeping and mourning.

"For the day is holy": A festival, set apart for joy and gladness.

"Neither be ye grieved": Inwardly; as they were not to show any signs of sorrow outwardly, so they were not to cherish grief inwardly.

The weeping stopped. They were to rejoice in their LORD.

Nehemiah 8:12 "And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them."

Freely and cheerfully.

"And to send portions": To the poor, who had nothing to eat and drink.

"And to make great mirth": With music, vocal and instrumental.

"Because they had understood the words that were declared unto them": The meaning of the several laws read and explained unto them. Whereby they better understood their duty, and in what instances and in what manner it was to be performed. How much more reason is there for joy and gladness, when the Gospel, and the doctrines of it, are clearly known and understood? (Psalm 89:15).

The Word of God will set you free. They were joyful, because they had heard and understood the law presented to them by Ezra and his helpers. There is a real joy in being able to understand the meaning of the Scriptures we read as well. The Bible (God's Word), is a guide to each of us to know God's will for our life.

Verses 8:13 – 9:37: The Jews celebrated the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, and confessed their history of sins.

Verses 13-18: The Feast of Tabernacles (Booths), had thanksgiving as its essential character (compare Lev. 23:33-43; Deut. 16:13-15). It was known in Solomon's time (1 Kings 8:2), and by Hosea in the northern kingdom (Hosea 12:9), and had been observed in the preceding century by Zerubbabel and his company (compare Ezra 3:4). Yet its detailed provisions were unknown even among the religious leaders. Evidently this was the first time that "all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths" and took part (verse 17). The reading of the Law was one of the prescribed features of the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 31:9-13). Here, 10 action verbs, gathered, understand, found, publish, went, brought, made, sat, read, kept", reinforce the effects of biblical preaching and teaching. People should hear God's Word with the intent of obeying it.

Nehemiah 8:13 "And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law."

"Even to understand the words of the law": The smaller group that gathered to Ezra consisted of those who had teaching responsibilities: the heads of the fathers' houses to their families, and the priests and Levites to the general population in the community (Mal. 2:6-7).

The reading of the law the day before was a sample of better things to come. Now those who had authority in their homes or in the temple, gathered, and Ezra taught them the law even more fully than before. Those who hear the Word and begin to study cannot, it seems, get enough. The more you study, the more you desire to study and it goes on and on. Humans cannot fully understand the Word of God. Each time we study, God reveals more and more of His Word to us.

Verses 14-17: Hearing the Word led to action, both individually and as a nation. On this occasion, the Israelites realized that since the days of Joshua they had neglected one of the Jewish celebrations "commanded" by God: The Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:33-36; Deut. 16:13-17). They immediately reinstated the feast, which anticipates the time when those who are in heaven will celebrate the joy of coming through the Tribulation (Rev. 19:1-10).

Nehemiah 8:14 "And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:"

The children of Israel, to be observed by them. Either by hearing it read the day before, or by conversation with Ezra. They perceived it was enjoined in the law, particularly in (Lev. 23:39).

"That the children of Israel should dwell in booths, in the feast of the seventh month": Which was the same month, and this the second day of it. And therefore, the time drew near for keeping it. For it was to begin on the fifteenth.

For details on the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles (compare Exodus 23:16; Lev. 23:33-44; Num. 29:12-38; Deut. 16:13-17).

This was speaking of the Feast of Tabernacles, which took place in October on our calendar. It appears that Zerubbabel had started the Feast of Tabernacles again, but they had not dwelt in booths during that time. There were three feasts that all male Hebrews were commanded to attend each year. Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles were the three.

Verses 15-16: "They should publish and proclaim in all their cities": Proclamations such as this carried the authority of the administration represented by leaders such as Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra, the priest and scribe (8:9), who had been used to reestablish the city, its worship, and its social life. The people responded to their directive.

Nehemiah 8:15 "And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as [it is] written."

That is, as Jarchi interprets it, by supplying it thus: and they commanded that they should publish, etc. Ezra and those with him gave orders that heralds should proclaim in all cities where the Jews dwelt that the Feast of Tabernacles would be kept, and they should prepare for it. And which seems to be the true sense, since it is not written in the law that such a proclamation should be made. But this was an order of their own, thereby to give notice of it, that all might be provided.

"Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written": In (Lev. 23:40), where the first three of these seem to be called boughs of goodly trees. Though the Jews commonly understand them of pomecitrons, of which the Syriac version here interprets the myrtle branches. And by them are meant the citron branches, with the leaves and fruit, and which the Jews make absolutely necessary to the keeping of the feast, and for beautiful ones will give a large price. Some of them go every year to Spain, and buy as many as they can, and dispose of them wherever Jews live. And those branches were to be fetched, not properly speaking to make the booths of, which were made of boards and planks. But for the decoration of them; and it was not necessary, according to Aben Ezra, that some of each of these should be gathered for that purpose, but of any sort of them. For he interprets the words disjunctively olive branches, or pine branches, or myrtle branches, etc. These, according to the common notion of the Jews, were tied up in little bundles, and carried in the hand, which they call "lulabs". And they observe, the thick branches were for them, which included the rest. Now these they were to fetch from the mount of Olives, and other mountains about Jerusalem. Near to which also there was a place called Motza; whither they went, and gathered the willows of the brook mentioned in (Lev. 23:39).

Myrtlewood grows two places in the world. One of those places is in Israel. They went out from the city to the mount and cut branches to make the booths. These were temporary structures to live in during the week of Tabernacles.

Nehemiah 8:16 "So the people went forth, and brought [them], and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim."

Went out of Jerusalem to the mountains adjacent, and fetched in branches of the said trees, one or another.

"And made themselves booths, everyone upon the roof of his house": Which were flat (Deut. 22:8). And they might be made anywhere, so be it they were open to the air.

"And in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God": The common people in the courtyards belonging to their houses. And the priests and Levites in the courts of the temple, the yards or open places adjoining to them.

"And in the street of the water gate": Which led to that, and seems to have been a very large street, in which many booths might be built (Neh. 3:26).

"And in the street of the gate of Ephraim": Which led to the gate through which the road lay to the tribe of Ephraim (see 2 Kings 14:13). None were erected without the walls of the city, for fear of the enemy.

"Water gate" (see notes on 3:26; 12:37). "Gate of Ephraim": This is believed to have been near the Old Gate (compare 3:6; 12:39).

Those who lived in the city, would make the booths on the top of their flat-roofed houses. The people who lived elsewhere would put their booths near the gates.

Nehemiah 8:17 "And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness."

These came to Jerusalem, and made them booths there. For there only was this feast kept (see John 7:2).

"And sat under the booths": There they dwelt during the seven days of it, in commemoration of their ancestors dwelling in booths in the wilderness (see Lev. 23:42).

"For since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so": Joshua observed it, when he had brought and settled the people of Israel in the land of Canaan; and it had been observed since. Before this time, as appears from (1 Kings 8:2; Ezra 3:4); but not so, with such exactness, with such zeal and affection, with such a regard to the law of God, as to read it every day of the feast, as in the next verse, and with such joy and gladness. Wherefore there is no reason to suspect a corruption in the text, as a learned man does, who supposes that Joshua is put for Josiah.

“For since the days of Jeshua ... great gladness”: The feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, had been celebrated since Joshua (2 Chron. 7:8-10; Ezra 3:4), but not with such joy.

"And there was very great gladness": That they were restored unto and settled in their land, had the book of the law, and the knowledge of it, and were directed and enabled to observe it.

The time spoken of here was approximately hundreds of years before the time of Joshua, who is probably intended by Jeshua above. Their gladness was that they knew what they were to do. They all built their little booths, and stayed in them during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Nehemiah 8:18 "Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day [was] a solemn assembly, according unto the manner."

That is, Ezra. This was done by him every day during the feast, whereas only the first and last days were the holy convocations on which it seems to have been read.

"And they kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according to the manner" (prescribed in Leviticus 23:39).

This was more than was required and arose from the exuberant zeal of the people.

This was speaking of Ezra reading in the book of the law of God. This was a time of not only returning to their homeland, but attempting to return to their God as well. The solemn assembly, kept on the eighth day, is described in the following Scriptures.

Leviticus 23:34-36 "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month [shall be] the feast of tabernacles [for] seven days unto the LORD." "On the first day [shall be] a holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work [therein]." "Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD: on the eighth day shall be a holy convocation unto you; and ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD: it [is] a solemn assembly; [and] ye shall do no servile work [therein]."

Nehemiah Chapter 8 Questions

1. Where did the people gather themselves together?
2. What did they ask Ezra to do?
3. What was Ezra called in verse 1?
4. What conclusion does the author wish the people of our country would come to?
5. The people, who came out of captivity, wanted to be in _____ relationship with their _____.

6. The congregation was made up of whom?
7. When did he bring the law before the people?
8. "All that could hear with understanding", probably, meant whom?
9. How long did he read the law before them?
10. Who were some of the men on the platform with Ezra, that we can safely assume read part of the time for him?
11. What two words describe the condition of the ears of those who heard the law?
12. What did Ezra stand on to read?
13. Ezra opened the book in the sight of _____ the people.
14. Why did the people stand, when the book was opened?
15. In verse 6, Ezra did what?
16. How did the people respond?
17. The lifting of their hands was in _____.
18. Their bowed heads showed their _____.
19. What did the Levites standing by do, when there was a pause in the reading of the law?
20. Nehemiah was their _____ leader.
21. Ezra was their _____ leader.
22. Why were they weeping?
23. What did Ezra say to them about their weeping?
24. The joy of the LORD is your _____.
25. The Word of God will set you _____.
26. The Bible is _____.
27. What Feast is verse 14 speaking of?
28. What had they failed to do in recent years, when celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles?
29. Where did they get the material for the booths?
30. Myrtlewood grows in 2 places in the world, where is one?

31. Where would they build the booths?
32. How many days did they kept the feast?
33. Where do we find the law on this?