



Nehemiah - Chapter Eight

IV Nehemiah 7:73b-10:39 - The Reading of the Law, and Covenant Renewal (continues)

IV.a Nehemiah 7:73b-8:12 - Ezra Summons the People to Obey the Law (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Eight

Ezra appears in the Book of Nehemiah for the first time as the people are gathered together and the Book of the Law, probably Deuteronomy, is read out in their hearing. The people then go on to celebrate the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles, celebrating the way the Lord protected them during the exodus.

^{7:73b} When the seventh month came – the people of Israel being settled in their towns –

Nehemiah 7:73b

This half of the verse is an addition to Ezra 2:70. It brings the perspective of the narrative back to Nehemiah's time. The reference to the seventh month, i.e. September/October – a festival month including the Day of Atonement – leads into the covenant renewal that follows. When the seventh month came, the children of Israel were in their cities. This list flows beautifully after the completion of the work, because it is a reminder that the work was really all about these people.

The walls were not all that important; what was important was the benefit the walls could have in the lives of God's people, enabling them to live in peace and security. The building work was not all that important; what was important was the benefit the building work had in the lives of God's people by teaching them to work hard, work together, work through adversity and attack, and keep working until the job is done.

IV.a.i Nehemiah 8:1-8 - The Law is Read

Ezra reads the Book of the Law to all the people and the Levites ensure that everyone has understood what was read to them.

¹ all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel.

Nehemiah 8:1

The Water Gate, in the old wall, had probably opened onto the Gihon Spring, the main water source outside the city wall. The people could have gathered either inside or outside the gate.

They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses. This demonstrates that the Spirit of God was at work even before the reading of God's Word. People do not gather together as one for the things of God unless the Spirit of God has moved them to be there, and they do not desire God's Word unless the Spirit of God has moved them to hear it.

Those who go to church in expectation of hearing the Word of God are already under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, it still requires them to become a full participant with the Spirit if they are going to actually *<<listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches>>* (Revelation 2:6b), and then understand what it is saying to them individually as well.

The book of the law of Moses. The phrase presumably refers here to all or most of what is known as the Pentateuch, although in Deuteronomy similar expressions apparently refer to that book in particular; refer to Deuteronomy 28:58, 28:61 and 31:9; as well as 2 Kings 22:8 and the associated comments. Given the time frame for the entire reading it seems most likely that either the entire Book of Deuteronomy or just the aspects of the law from the other books that applied to their daily lives was actually read out.

² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month.

Nehemiah 8:2

The priest Ezra. Ezra had authorisation from King Artaxerxes: *<<And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let*

judgement be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment>> (Ezra 7:25-26), but more importantly, from the Mosaic Law itself: *<<They teach Jacob your ordinances, and Israel your law; they place incense before you, and whole burnt-offerings on your altar>>* (Deuteronomy 33:10). The description as scribe in v.1 and priest here are not in conflict as he could easily take on both duties. It is known Ezra cared about God's Word, because he was a scribe - someone who copied the Bible by hand as well as keeping other records regarding the spiritual life of the community and the teachings to be given to the people. He was a man devoted to God himself, because he was a godly priest.

Ezra was the man responsible for having the temple rebuilt and for returning God's people to worship. Nehemiah, in all his work of rebuilding the walls, just carried on the work Ezra had begun. In partnership he provided both spiritual and political leadership.

The assembly. The people of Israel gathered for worship. The inclusion of both men and women is stressed, since the strict keeping of the great Jerusalem festivals was compulsory for men only: *<<Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed; all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you>>* (Deuteronomy 16:16-17).

Contrary to some beliefs, women were not barred from spiritual life nor were they subservient to their husbands in the home. They were considered to be equal in the sight of God but with clearly different roles to play in the home and in their society.

All who could hear with understanding. Understanding is a key theme in this chapter since it was vital that all should be able to know and learn God's ways as revealed to Israel. The reading and teaching of the law may have been neglected in the generations since the first return from Babylon. This shows who needed to hear the Word of God. Everyone who could understand it needed to hear it. As in the time of Jesus: *<<Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile'>>* (Mark 7:14-15), which was not so much about dietary food laws but about the true status of a person's heart.

The first day of the seventh month was a day of solemn rest, like a Sabbath, in the month in which the Day of Atonement was kept and the Festival of Booths was celebrated; refer to Leviticus 23:24-34. Remarkably, the Day of Atonement is apparently not observed on this occasion or at least its observance is not recorded.

³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

Nehemiah 8:3

He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate. Ezra read God's Word from dawn to midday. For some six hours he read God's Word and the people listened. This was a move of the Spirit of God. People who will be attentive to the book of the law for some six hours are people touched by the Spirit of God.

From early morning until midday is literally 'from the light,' i.e. dawn as stated above. The book was lengthy and there may have been frequent pauses for explanation of the text. These people gathered from dawn to hear God's Word. They were willing to sacrifice something to hear it - they wanted it, and like Jacob in Genesis 32:26 they would not let go until they had their blessing.

⁴ The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.

Nehemiah 8:4

The wooden platform, together with the group of leading men standing with Ezra, emphasised the solemnity of the reading, and allowed all the people to see and hear Ezra.

King Solomon had a much grander platform built when he had the original temple dedicated: <<Solomon had made a bronze platform five cubits long, five cubits wide, and three cubits high, and had set it in the court; and he stood on it. Then he knelt on his knees in the presence of the whole assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands towards heaven>> (2 Chronicles 6:13). Those were, of course, much wealthier times but it should be noted that the purpose of the platform was for the people to see and hear what was said and not for how ornate it looked or how much it cost to construct. As with all things of God, it is function or purpose and not appearance that is important. People can gather to worship God in humble surroundings as well as in the grandest cathedral and God will accept them equally.

It does show that time was taken in the preparation of reading God's Word and that is important. However, the most important part is the time that each person spends in preparing their heart for God.

On his right hand; on his left hand. To both sides of Ezra were men who were supporting him in his ministry of teaching God's Word. The ministry of God's Word has the greatest effect when people can see people, especially leaders, who are in support of it and in obedience to it.

⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.

Nehemiah 8:5

Ezra opened the book. The act of reading, in this carefully organised setting, is also a corporate act of worship.

When he opened it, all the people stood up. They had respect for God's Word. They recognised it for what it was - the Word of God, not the word of man. They honoured it. This is evidence of two things. First, that the Spirit of God is at work; second, that something good is going to happen.

⁶ Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.

Nehemiah 8:6-7

Then Ezra blessed the Lord. This phrase is a way of showing how much the people value the name of the Lord and is a way of saying that he was praised by Ezra.

All the people answered. This work of the Word of God and the Spirit of God had three immediate results:

1. The people thanked God by saying Amen when Ezra blessed the Lord.
2. They prayed by lifting up their hands: <<*I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument*>> (1 Timothy 2:8)
3. They worshipped God by bowing down before him with their faces to the ground: <<*When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground*>> (Luke 5:12b).

Thanksgiving, prayer, and praise are all good measures of how the Spirit of God and Word of God are working in and through his people.

The Levites presumably moved among the crowd, ensuring that all could understand what was being read. Such interpretation was one of their special tasks; refer also to Deuteronomy 33:10 and 2 Chronicles 17:7-9. In order to facilitate this teaching, the law may have been read in manageable sections. The kind of understanding meant is primarily spiritual, although there could also have been problems with basic concepts, and even language and audibility.

⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Nehemiah 8:8

So they read from the book. The verse sums up vv.3-7 and combines the reading and interpreting, although the primary reading was done by Ezra.

So that the people understood the reading. Special men were appointed to help the people understand God's Word. After the reading they needed to understand it because if they did not understand it, it would do them little good.

Understanding needs to be the first goal of any preacher or teacher. When someone stands to teach God's people, there are some things that they always need to remember:

- If the people leave knowing five helpful hints to a better life but do not have a greater understanding of God's Word, the teacher has failed.
- If the people leave having been amused by humour, entertained by anecdotes or captivated by dramatic stories but do not have a greater understanding of God's Word, the teacher has failed.
- If the people leave motivated to action or praying a prayer but it is not based on a greater understanding of God's Word, the teacher has failed.
- If the people leave admiring the teacher but do not have a greater understanding of God's Word, the teacher has failed and will be accountable before God for such failure: *<<Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness>>* (James 3:1).

It is important to see why God's people need special help in understanding God's Word:

- First, because the things of God are spiritually discerned and not intellectually discerned. The Holy Spirit uses gifted teachers to bring spiritual discernment to his people, helping them to understand what God's Word says.

- Second, because it was first written in a different language, in a different culture, in a different place and at a far distant time, teachers help others to understand it all in the present day and culture.
- Third, because the human mind is often slow to understand things that will convict the heart they need it to be made very clear to them.

Understanding is not only necessary for those who have not become familiar with the Bible. Even people who have perhaps read their Bible frequently all their Christian life and are very familiar with it still need guidance as to what it might be saying to them at a particular point in time or a given circumstance.

The preacher must speak in a clear, easy-to-understand way. His or her main goal is to make the people understand, not to impress or entertain them. The preacher must also communicate the sense of the passage of Scripture and not their own agenda or favourite personal topics. The people must leave understanding God's Word better rather than knowing the preacher's opinions.

IV.a.ii Nehemiah 8:9-12 - The People are to be Joyful

The people wept when they heard the law read out to them but they were told that it was a joyful time and that they should go and celebrate with their families. Although sorrow for sin was a positive response, joy at renewed relationship with God was the teaching's ultimate purpose.

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

Nehemiah 8:9

Nehemiah and Ezra together decide that this holy day, for that is what it is: <<Speak to the people of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of complete rest, a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts>> (Leviticus 23:24), should be one of joy, although its reading led many to sense the need to repent of their sins.

Do not mourn or weep. Ezra, Nehemiah and the Levites did not want the people to mourn, even though it is a good thing to be sad under the conviction of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. Yet if the sense of conviction is greater than the sense that God is doing a good and holy work, then tears are not good. Knowledge of personal sin should never be bigger than knowledge of Jesus as saviour. People are great sinners: <<since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>> (Romans 3:23), but Jesus is a greater saviour. Therefore, the joy of the Lord is a person's strength even when they are being convicted of their sin. When a person

is convicted of sin they know that God is doing something beneficial in them, so they can be thankful, joyful and take comfort in that knowledge.

For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. The Word of God was doing its intended work. Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:16, states two things the Word of God is profitable for: reproof and correction. Sometimes it hurts to be reproofed and corrected, and these tears were evidence of some of that pain.

¹⁰ Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’

Nehemiah 8:10

The joy of the Lord is your strength. The people felt sad because they were aware of their own sin. However, they could walk in joy because God was doing a great work in them. Human emotions are not beyond a person’s control; they can do God’s will even when they do not feel like it. As the people rejoiced in God and delighted in his presence, he would show himself strong to help them and defend them. Joy was a keynote because God had saved Israel, in both the remote and the recent past, and this story of salvation would have been told again in the reading of the Book of the Law.

Send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared. It was an important part of the culture and a principle of the festivals that all should share in such joyful occasions by having food brought to them: *<<Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favour in your sight; for we have come on a feast day. Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David>> (1 Samuel 25:8), <<When David had finished offering the burnt-offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts, and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes>> (2 Samuel 6:18-19), <<Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor>> (Esther 9:20-22), and: <<He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your*

friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous’>> (Luke 14:12-14).

¹¹ So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.’ ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Nehemiah 8:11-12

And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions. These are important themes of worship in Deuteronomy, where worship was associated with God’s rich gifts and the privilege of sharing them; refer to Deuteronomy 12:12, 14:23 and 14:26-29.

They had understood the words that were declared to them. They went away praising God, because understanding God’s Word brings such a sweet sense of joy.

IV.b Nehemiah 8:13-18 - The Festival of Booths Celebrated

This family-oriented festival highlighted God’s protection of Israel in the desert before the conquest.

¹³ On the second day the heads of ancestral houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to the scribe Ezra in order to study the words of the law. ¹⁴ And they found it written in the law, which the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the people of Israel should live in booths during the festival of the seventh month, ¹⁵ and that they should publish and proclaim in all their towns and in Jerusalem as follows, ‘Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written.’

Nehemiah 8:13-15

On the second day. The following day the leaders of the community, taking up their responsibility for studying the Law, realise that they are in the month of the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles, i.e. the main festival of the seventh month; refer to Leviticus 23:33-43.

The heads of ancestral houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites. Leaders have a special need to understand and walk in God’s Word. Their

ignorance or disobedience affects far more than themselves - it affects everyone they have an influence on.

And they found it written in the law, which the Lord had commanded by Moses.

This was beautiful, simple obedience. Their attitude was that God said it, so they will do it. Even though tradition did not tell them to keep the Festival of Booths they relied on God's Word and not on tradition.

The people kept this festival by living in temporary dwellings made from **branches** to commemorate how they had lived in **booths** in the wilderness after God had brought them out of Egypt: <<*You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God*>> (Leviticus 23:42-43), and: <<*I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; I will make you live in tents again, as on the days of the appointed festival*>> (Hosea 12:9). They could see God's blessing and provision for them right then and it made something historic seem brand new to them.

New revelations of God from past events often have a greater impact on people than do the current signs and wonders that seem to pass them by.

¹⁶ So the people went out and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on the roofs of their houses, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them; for from the days of Jeshua son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.

Nehemiah 8:16-17

From the days of Jeshua the son of Nun. **Jeshua** is another form of Joshua and was also used in Ezra for the name of the first returning priest: <<*They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah*>> (Ezra 2:2a).

The people of Israel had not done so. Although the Festival of Booths had been celebrated occasionally, e.g. in 1 Kings 8:65, 2 Chronicles 7:9 and Ezra 3:4, it had apparently not been celebrated in this way with such overwhelming joy, or in such unsettled conditions or with all the people participating.

And there was very great rejoicing. Because of their great obedience to God's Word, there was great joy. People so often are deceived into thinking the path of

gladness is in doing their own thing but gladness and freedom come only through obedience to the Lord's will.

¹⁸ And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the festival for seven days; and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

Nehemiah 8:18

And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. This revival began by the Spirit of God working through the Word of God; it continued that way also.

They kept the festival for seven days in accordance with Leviticus 23:34. For the reading of the law at the Festival of Booths every seven years, refer to Deuteronomy 31:10-11.