

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.

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.

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.

Nehemiah records that at some point the people (men and women) gathered together in the street in front of the water gate and asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the book of the law of Moses (the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch) in which he had recorded the LORD's commands to Israel. Ezra complied. It is noted that it was the first day of the 7th month. Though it is not referenced, this was the day designated as the feast of trumpets that marked the beginning of the Jewish new year.

It would seem from the previous chapter that these people would have been those that remained to live in Jerusalem after others had returned to their own cities.

Nehemiah 7:73 "So the priests, and the Levites, and the porters, and the singers, and some of the people, and the Nethinims, and all Israel, dwelt in their cities; and when the seventh month came, the children of Israel were in their cities."

Ezra read to the congregation from the morning until midday, and the people listened attentively. This could have been from 4-6 hours.

JFB offers this insight: "The public reading of the Scriptures was required by the law to be made every seventh year; but during the long period of the captivity this excellent practice, with many others, had fallen into neglect, till revived, on this occasion."

Deuteronomy 31:10-12 "And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law...."

Coffman offers this explanation regarding Ezra's presence: "Where was Ezra during the rebuilding of the wall? We do not know. He might have been recalled to Persia years earlier, or he might have been temporarily absent from Jerusalem. "The most probable explanation is that he had been recalled to Persia in 456 B.C., and that now, eleven years later in 444 B.C., he was allowed to return to

Jerusalem."¹⁵¹ It is not unreasonable at all to suppose that Nehemiah had sent for him to come and celebrate the dedication of the completed wall."

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.

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:

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.

They had built a raised platform from wood for him to stand on as he read and taught so that all the people could see him. He was flanked by thirteen men, probably some of the religious leaders of the people that were probably needed to help with the reading. I know my voice begins giving out after a while when I read aloud to my grandkids.

When Ezra opened the book to begin to read, the people stood to their feet in an attitude of reverence for God's word. He pronounced a blessing upon "the LORD, the great God," and the people affirmed him with a double Amen. They lifted up their hands and bowed their heads to the ground as they worshipped the LORD.

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.

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.

Several men among the priests and Levites helped translate and explain the law as the people stood listening to Ezra read from it. Point is made that they read from it "distinctly," clearly and plainly. They explained what it meant so that the people had clear understanding of what they heard.

That should be the purpose of every preacher in every pulpit in all churches across this world—no matter how big or how small their congregation. They should be focused on teaching the plain meaning of God's word—not twisting it or manipulating it to accomplish their own purposes.

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.

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

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.

Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest/scribe and the Levites united in declaring the day to be a holy day unto the LORD "your God." They told the people not to mourn and weep, because that was the first response the people had upon hearing God's word. They realized how great was their sin and how far they had gotten from living according to God's law.

Nehemiah (or Ezra) told the people to go and celebrate and take joy in the strength of the LORD. I think the Levites circulated among the people to encourage them to turn their tears into laughter. It was a great thing that they understood God's word, a cause for rejoicing. I know it gives me great joy as I study scripture and gain better understanding and learn more about its truth. My prayer ever mirrors that of the psalmist: *Psalms 119:18 "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."*

The NIV Commentary provides insight on verse 10: "The fat of sacrificial animals was offered to God as the tastiest element of the burnt offering (Lev 1:8, 12), the fellowship offering (Lev 3:8-10), and the guilt offering (Lev 7:3-4)."

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.

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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

The very next day the leading men of the city, the priests and Levites all gathered again to meet with Ezra for more teaching from the law. I liked Guzik's comment: "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."

These men learned about the feast of tabernacles that should be held during the 7th month in remembrance of God's provision for His people when He delivered them out of Egypt and in celebration of the harvest, during which they lived in booths made from tree branches.

*Leviticus 23:40-43 "And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. And ye shall keep it a feast unto the LORD seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month. **Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.**"*

*Deuteronomy 16:13-15 "Thou shalt observe the feast of tabernacles seven days, **after that thou hast gathered in thy corn and thy wine:** And thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates. Seven days shalt thou keep a solemn feast unto the LORD thy God in the place which the LORD shall choose: **because the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thine increase, and in all the works of thine hands, therefore thou shalt surely rejoice.**"*

They then proceeded to gather material and make booths throughout the city. Nehemiah notes that this feast had not been celebrated with such joy since the days of Joshua the son of Nun who had led them into the Promised Land. (Only through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit could Nehemiah have made such a statement; he could not know that personally.) Everyone rejoiced. Every day during the feast, Ezra read from the book of God's law. On the 8th day the feast ended with a solemn assembly, a time of worship.

Chuck Smith provides an interesting historical insight regarding the feast of tabernacles: "During the time of Christ, they further celebrated this particular feast by a daily procession of the priests from the temple mount down to the pool of Siloam where the priest would fill these great water pots with water from the pool, and then would come again singing up the steps back to the temple mount. And as the people were all gathered worshipping there, the priest would pour these water jugs out onto the pavement and let the water just splash on the pavement. And that was a reminder to them of how that God provided water out of the rock in the wilderness for their fathers. And they would sing and worship God as the water was poured out on the pavement during the days of the Feast of the Tabernacles. They did that for seven days. The feast lasted for eight days. On the eighth day there was no procession to the pool of Siloam. There was no pouring out of water. This was to commemorate the fact God brought us into the

land, a land that is well-watered, a land that we do not need a miraculous supply out of the rock. That we are now dwelling in the land that God had promised. And so the eighth day no pouring of water, no procession. Just as an acknowledgment that God had kept His covenant with Abraham. Kept His word with their fathers, brought them into the land.”