

Nehemiah 8

When Ezra first arrived in Jerusalem, the temple had been rebuilt but the moral and spiritual condition of the people was deplorable (Ezra 9:1-4; 10:2, 10). But as he prayerfully taught them God's Word, they began to respond and to obey the laws of God.

Fourteen years later, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and challenged the people to trust God to help them rebuild the walls.

The effectiveness of Ezra's ministry is seen in the people's behavior after the walls were completed. The two-month building program under Nehemiah was a pause in Ezra's teaching, but apparently it helped motivate the people to want to know more of God's Law. They themselves asked Ezra to continue his teaching ministry among them (v. 1).¹

This important chapter tells of spiritual revival among God's people through the public reading of the Scriptures.²

What happened after the wall had been rebuilt and the Israelites were settled in their outlying ancestral towns (v. 1)? On the first day of the seventh month, the Israelites gathered in the town square in front of the Water Gate and told Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

What does that tell us about the people? This was clear evidence of their spiritual hunger....evidence the Spirit of God was moving in their hearts. They had just been through a 70 year spiritual drought during the Babylonian captivity. They were ready for revival.

What is the Book of the Law of Moses? Their bible....the Torah....the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). This was Israel's instruction manual for how to walk before God.

Who was Ezra? He was the most important scribe in Israel at this time, and he was a Jewish priest. He arrived in Jerusalem 14 years before Nehemiah. He was involved in the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel. Ezra's primary purpose in going to his homeland was to teach God's Law to the Jews. He oversaw the spiritual climate of the Jewish community.

What did Ezra do following the request of the people (vv. 2-3)? On the first day of the seventh month, the people gathered together to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:24-25). Today it is celebrated as Rosh Hashanah. Ezra opened the book of the Law of Moses and read it out loud from daybreak until noon. All the people listened attentively all morning.

Who made up his audience? Jewish men, women and all who were old enough to understand.

What did the setting look like (v. 4)? Ezra was standing above the people on a high wooden platform specifically built for the occasion and he was flanked by thirteen Levites

When Ezra opened the book, what did the people do (v. 5)? They all stood up to honor the reading of the Book of the Law of Moses.

When Ezra praised the Lord, what did the people do (v. 6)? They lifted their hands in praise, cried out "Amen" and bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

What role did the Levites play in this worship (vv. 7-8)? Not only did the Levites read the Word of God, but they also translated it from the Hebrew language into Aramaic, the common language of the day, and helped them to understand what was being read. Many of the Jews present did not know Hebrew (13:24), having grown up in Babylon and elsewhere, where they only spoke Aramaic. The Torah was originally written in a different language, in a different culture, in a different place, and at a far distant time.

Nehemiah did not explain exactly how Ezra and the Levites read and explained God's Law to this large crowd that may have numbered between 40,000 and 50,000 people (7:66-67). Possibly Ezra read sections of the Law in the presence of all the people (3), and then at certain times the Levites circulated among them and made it clear and explained what Ezra had read as the people stood in groups (7-8).³

What did Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites tell the people (vv. 9-11)? The people had been convicted of their departure from God's will as they heard the Law read. Their initial reaction was to mourn and weep over their sins, but Nehemiah told them this was a time to celebrate with great joythe Feast of Trumpets – the 1st day of the 7th month of the Jewish civil calendar. This was not a time for weeping but for rejoicing. Only one occasion for mourning and fasting was found among Israel's seven annual feasts, and that was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)⁴ which fell on the 10th day of this month while the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) was celebrated from the 15th day through the 21st day. So, these three major feasts all fell in the fall in the same month of Tishrei.

How did the people respond (v. 12)? They celebrated with great joy because they now understood the meaning of the festival.

The Jews held seven annual feasts or festivals. Four were in the spring of the Hebrew year: Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits and Pentecost. Three were in the fall of the Hebrew year: Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Tabernacles (Feast of Booths). Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles were the three major pilgrimage feasts for which all Jewish males were required to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate (Exodus 23:14-19).

Why don't we have any feasts today like this? The Old Testament feasts commemorated certain specific events in the history of the Jews under the Mosaic (Old) covenant. Now, our "feast" is communion which commemorates the atoning death of Christ on the cross under the New Covenant.

What did the people do on the second day of the month (v. 13)? They gathered around Ezra again to hear him read from the Law. Note that the spiritually revived people had an insatiable appetite to learn more about God's Word. This is a normal outcome of true revival.

What else did they discover from the reading of the Book of the Law (vv. 14-15)? They discovered the regulations concerning the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles), which was to be observed later that same month.⁵

NOTE: In Leviticus, God called on the Jews to observe the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) on the 15th through the 21st days of the seventh month (Leviticus 23:34-36). This was a happy celebration that looked back to the Israelites' years of wandering in the wilderness, when they lived in booths that they made out of branches. It recalled the protection, preservation, and shelter that God had provided for His people.⁶

How did the people respond to this new news (vv. 15-17)? Since they discovered these instructions on the second day of the seventh month (v. 13), the timing was perfect. They had exactly two weeks to prepare for the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) that would start on the 15th day of the month. So they quickly had the people get branches from various kinds of trees and build booths (temporary shelters) in various places -- on rooftops, in courtyards, and in the streets including the square by the Gate of Ephraim. Joy ran high as the Word of God was daily opened to hungry hearts. This recalled their days of wandering in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:43). Their celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was the first time and the most festive time it had been done by the entire assembly since the days of Joshua.⁷

Nehemiah seems to have wanted, in this chapter, and indeed in the whole book, to emphasize the positive aspects of the restoration of the wall, namely, God's faithfulness and the people's joy.⁸

What happened on the next several days of the feast (v. 18)? Ezra read from the Book of the Law of Moses every day. The people celebrated for seven days and then on the eighth day they held an assembly.

¹ Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 689.

² William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 488.

³ Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 689

⁴ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 488.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Nehemiah, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 48.

⁷ Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 690.

⁸ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Nehemiah, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 49.