

Nehemiah 8:1-18 (ESV)

¹ And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And 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.

⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped 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. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

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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 as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

¹¹ So the Levites calmed 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. ¹³ On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.

¹⁴ And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "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." ¹⁶ So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, 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 the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. 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 feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

Nehemiah is a book with insights for us into restoration, renewal, leadership, and God's faithfulness.

Read Nehemiah 7:73b-8:18
(Questions for later personal reflection)

20. Who initiated the assembly at the Water Gate, and why? What series of events have set the stage for this in previous chapters?
21. How was the Word presented to the people? How did they respond?
22. Why should weeping give way to rejoicing? How is the joy of the Lord our strength?
23. What were the purposes in celebrating the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles? What does Nehemiah 8 teach us about worship? About Holi-days?

Chapter Seven of Nehemiah is a repeat of the List of Exiles who returned that is also in Ezra chapter two. Apparently this list was useful as efforts to repopulate the city were underway – establishing who had legitimate interests within. This matter will be returned to in Chapter eleven. We are reminded that Ezra-Nehemiah was one book until later in the Christian Era. This is also important for us as there is a major shift in Chapters eight through ten of Nehemiah, where the story of Ezra and his work restoring God's Law is continued.

Consulting the chart of the development of the themes in Ezra-Nehemiah, it appears that three successive returns are narrated. Each begins with Royal help, involves a journey to Jerusalem, undergoes opposition before their “missions” are completed, and end in feast and celebration. Together they develop the theme that God's Good Hand restores His Covenant Community.

The first journey back under Zerubbabel was concerned with rebuilding the temple and restoring Worship. - it climaxed in the observance of Passover. (Ezra 1-6).

The second journey back under Ezra was concerned with restoring the Mosaic Law and renewing of the Covenant. Ezra found to his dismay when he arrived in Jerusalem that their identity had been seriously compromised through intermarriage with the neighboring peoples, resulting in weeping, confession and establishing the guilty. (Ezra 9-10)

There is then a break in the Ezra narrative as the Walls are rebuilt. It picks up again in Nehemiah eight - it climaxes with a great revival at the Water Gate, with celebration anew of the Feast of Booths and restoration of Sabbath observance. (Ezra 6-9 and Nehemiah 8-10)

The third journey began with Nehemiah's arrival and was concerned with rebuilding the Walls and restoring community, providing both separation and security for God's people. It climaxed in a special dedication Service of the Walls. (Nehemiah 1-7; 11-12) Chapter 13 then looks back at the state of Jerusalem several years later from the perspective of Nehemiah when he returned from Susa.

Nehemiah 8 -10 thus picks up Ezra's narrative from Ezra 10 with an account of a revived community proclaiming the Word (8), confession of Sin (9) and a covenantal recommitment (10).

Ezra was a teacher well versed in the study of Law of Moses. (Ezra 7:6) He had wept in prayer before God for this people for fourteen years, setting an example by his own practices, and taught the Word patiently, exercising discipline. It is possible that he had something to do with preserving the books of the OT we cherish.

There was a revival at the Water Gate, initiated by God's Spirit within the people. Seemingly spontaneous – certainly the Spirit prepared for it through Ezra's years of persevering prayer and teaching ministry (Ezra 9:3-10:3), exercising discipline (Ezra 10), working together on the Wall, (Neh 3-6) and Nehemiah's stand for social justice (Neh 5).

The setting is in a large open area near the Water Gate. It may have been outside the walls, a wooden platform has been built.

Ezra read the the Law to a crowd of at least 30,000 people, maybe many more. It is interesting to speculate the role of the thirteen men beside him – were they amplifying his reading aloud? They seem to have included some leaders from the people, and repentant men from the list in Ezra 10. Thirteen Levites circulated – instructing and translating (since many were not familiar with Mosaic Hebrew), giving clear meaning so people could understand. “Understanding” is a key word in this chapter. (Neh 8:2, 3, 7-8, 12, Ezra probably paused at appropriate points in his reading to allow this – it is unlikely he read continuously for eight hours. It is on the basis of this understanding they could go from weeping to feasting. (Neh 8:12). Nehemiah, ever the practical man, called for providing for those who have nothing prepared. (Neh 8:9-10).

It is interesting to see how all the senses and emotions are involved in this worship: hearing (vss 2, 3) , seeing (vs 5), taste and smell (vss 10, 12), physical movements (vss 5, 6); weeping and rejoicing (vss 9, 12, 17).

The Feast of booths (Tabernacles) was revived with enthusiasm – a time for the proclaiming and hearing of God's Word of reconnecting with their heritage – a reminder of Israel's time in the Wilderness. (Lev 23:33-44; Deut 16:13-15; 31:9-13) Joy and celebration pervades this chapter. (Neh 8:6, 9-10,, 12, 17-18).