

Nehemiah 8
November 28, 2021

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: What can happen when children of God start moving away from reading the Bible? [Let people engage]

Transition: When God's people get away from loving and reading the Word of God, they lose the blessing of God. Nehemiah understood this. He recognized that the *material* needs of the city had been met; now it was time to focus on the *spiritual* needs of the people in the city. So he called upon Ezra, the scribe, to be their teacher.

We should note that *Ezra and Nehemiah put the Word of God FIRST in the life of the city*. What happened in Jerusalem from that point on was a by-product of the people's response to the Scriptures. As we read this text, notice the different responses to the Word of God as the Israelites heard the Scripture read to them. Let's begin.

BOOK:

8¹ all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear (or God, translating it) and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

¹³ On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”—as it is written. (See Lev. 23:37-40)

¹⁶ So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

¹⁸ Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

If we read and study the Word of God only from a sense of duty, then its treasures may never be revealed to us. It is the believer who rejoices in the Word, who delights to read and study it day by day, who will find God's hidden treasures. “Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands” (Ps. 112:1, NIV). Do you delight in God's Word?

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Determined* (pp. 93-105). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

NEHEMIAH 8 - The People and the Book

French author Victor Hugo said over a century ago, “England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England.” Supporting that view, historians tell us that Elizabethan England was indeed a country of one book, and that book was the Bible.

When they arrived in America, the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them that same reverence for the Word of God. “The Bible came with them,” said American statesman Daniel Webster, “and it is not to be doubted that to the free and universal reading of the Bible is to be ascribed in that age that men were indebted for right views of civil liberties.” President Woodrow Wilson said, “America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.”

Whether the Bible is “making” any nation today may be debated, but one thing is sure: The Scriptures helped to “make” the nation of Israel. They are a “people of the Book” as no other nation has been, and the church today would do well to follow ancient Israel’s example. When God’s people get away from loving, reading, and obeying the Word of God, they lose the blessing of God. If we want to be like fruitful trees, we must delight in God’s Word (Ps. 1:2–3).

This explains why Nehemiah called for a “Bible conference” and invited Ezra the scribe to be the teacher. The walls were now finished, and the gates were hung. The *material* needs of the city had been met; now it was time to focus on the *spiritual* needs of the people in the city. Chapters 8–13 of the book record that spiritual ministry: instructing the people (chap. 8), confessing sin (chap. 9), dedicating the walls (chaps 10–12), and cleansing the fellowship (chap. 13).

It is important to note that *Ezra and Nehemiah put the Word of God first in the life of the city*. What happened in Jerusalem from that point on was a by-product of the people’s response to the Scriptures. “The primary task of the church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God,” said Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. “The decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching had declined” (*Preaching and Preachers*, pp. 19, 24). The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to cleanse and revive the hearts of the people of God.

If God is to work in and through His people, then they must respond positively to His Word; and this chapter describes three basic responses: understanding the Word (8:1–8), rejoicing in the Word (vv. 9–12), and obeying the Word (vv. 13–18). The whole person—mind (understanding), heart (rejoicing), and will (obeying)—must be captive to God’s truth.

1. We must understand the Word of God (Neh. 8:1–8)

The Bible is not a “magic book” that changes people or circumstances because somebody reads it or recites it. *God’s Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life-changing power*. Note that six times in this chapter you can find “understanding” mentioned (vv. 2–3, 7–8, 12–13). Only those people old enough to understand the Scripture were permitted to be in the assembly (v. 3). In our Lord’s “Parable of the Sower” (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23), the emphasis

is on understanding the Word of God. Jesus compared understanding and receiving the Word to the planting of seed in the soil, where it takes root and bears fruit.

Ezra was the ideal man to conduct this outdoor Bible school. He was a priest and scribe who “had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). He had come to Jerusalem about fourteen years before Nehemiah had arrived and had already sought to bring the people back to the ways of the Lord (Ezra 7–10).

That the leaders chose the Water Gate for the site of the assembly is interesting. In the Bible, water for washing is a picture of the Word of God (John 15:3; Eph. 5:26), while water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God (John 7:37–39). When we apply the water of the Word to our lives, then the Spirit can work and bring the help we need. It is refreshing to the soul when you receive the Word and allow the Spirit to teach you.

Notice the various ministries that Ezra performed for the people during that special conference.

He brought the Book (Neh. 8:1–4). This was on the first day of the seventh month, which was the Jewish equivalent of our New Year’s Day. The seventh month was a special time in the Jewish calendar because the Jews celebrated the Feast of Trumpets on the first day, the Day of Atonement on the tenth day, and the Feast of Tabernacles from the fifteenth day to the twenty-first day (Lev. 23:23–44). It was the perfect time for the nation to get right with the Lord and make a fresh new beginning.

The Book that Ezra brought was “the Book of the Law.” This was probably the entire scroll of the Torah, the five Books of Moses, the very foundation of the Jewish religion and civil law. It isn’t likely that Ezra read and explained all five Books of Moses in that short a time. Perhaps he concentrated on explaining Deuteronomy and referred to the other books as he had need.

Ezra stood on a wooden platform (“pulpit”) above the people so they could see and hear him better. He faced the public square where the people stood, and the wall and gate behind him may have served as a sounding board to help project his voice to the vast assembly. In verse 4, he named thirteen men who stood with him, perhaps leaders representing the tribes. Thirteen more men are named in verse 7 along with the Levites; perhaps they were teaching priests.

He opened the Book (Neh. 8:5–6). When Ezra lifted the scroll and unrolled it to the passage he would read, the people who were seated in the square honored the Word of God by standing up. They knew they would not be hearing a mere man speak his own ideas; they would be hearing the very Word of God (1 Thes. 2:13). The people remained standing while the Law was read and explained (Neh. 8:7). Ezra started his reading and teaching early in the morning and continued through midday (v. 3), which means the congregation stood and listened for five or six hours; and this continued for a week (v. 18). No doubt from time to time, he gave the people opportunities to rest; but the people were there to hear God speak and were willing to stand and listen.

After he opened the Word, “Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God” (v. 6). In many churches, there is a blessing *after* the reading of the Scripture; but there is certainly nothing wrong with praising the Lord for His Word *before* we read and hear it. The people affirmed his words by saying “Amen, Amen” (see 5:13), which means “So be it!” It was a united congregation (8:1) that honored the Scriptures and was willing to devote half of their day to hearing it read and taught. They didn’t worship the Book; they worshiped the Lord who spoke to them from the Book.

Our churches today have a desperate need in their public services to show more respect for the Word of God. We are commanded to “give attention to the public reading of Scripture” (1

Tim. 4:13, NASB); and yet in many churches, the only Scripture publicly read is the text of the sermon. “Independent churches” criticize “liturgical churches” for being bound to tradition, but the so-called “liturgical churches” at least devote themselves to a systematic public reading of the Word of God. (The word “liturgy” simply means “a form of public worship.” *Every* church has a liturgy, either a good one or a bad one.) We wonder how the Holy Spirit feels when He sees Bibles put on the church floor, or used as portable filing cabinets for miscellaneous papers, or even left behind in church where they are stacked up and finally given to the local city mission. We will *defend* the Bible as the Word of God, but we don’t always *treat* it like the Word of God.

We are also in too big a hurry to have the meeting end. In some parts of the world, especially in Eastern Europe before the collapse of the Communist bloc, believers would stand for hours in crowded churches to hear Bible teaching. In the average Western evangelical church, the shorter the sermon, the better we like it.

He read and explained the Book (Neh. 8:7–8). The common people didn’t own copies of the Scriptures, so they were thrilled to hear the Word of God. The word *distinctly* in verse 8 means that the Law was explained to the people in a language they could understand. The Word was translated and expounded in such a way that the people were able to apply it to their own lives. The Hebrew language would have undergone some changes since the days when Moses wrote the Pentateuch, and the everyday conversational Hebrew of the people would be different in some ways from ancient Hebrew. We need new translations of the Bible, not because the Bible changes, but because our language changes.

Suppose you had to use John Wycliffe’s Version of the Bible, the oldest version in English. How much of this passage would you understand *if you did not already know it from another version?*

alle ye that traueilen & ben chargid come to me & I schal fulfille you. take ye my yok on you & lerne ye of me for I am mylde and meke in herte: and ye schulen finde rest to youre soulis/ for my yok is softe & my charge liyt.

Wycliffe’s translation goes back about 600 years (1382); but between Moses’ writing of the Law and Ezra’s reading of the Law, a thousand years had elapsed!

The Levites assisted Ezra in teaching the Law (v. 7), for this was one of their God-given ministries (Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:7). They probably mingled with the people and, when there was a break in the reading, answered questions and told them how to apply the Law to their own lives. Here we have a balance between the public proclamation of the Word in the large assembly and the personal application in the smaller groups. Both are important.

2. We must rejoice in the Word (Neh. 8:9–12)

As Ezra read and explained the Word, the assembly’s first response was one of conviction and grief. They mourned over their sins, “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). The law can’t save us; it can only convince us that we need to be saved and then point us to Jesus Christ the Savior (Gal. 3:24). The Jews had just observed the annual Day of Atonement, and the Lord had dealt with their sins (Lev. 16); so they should have been rejoicing in His forgiveness. On the Jewish calendar, the Feast of Tabernacles (Succoth) follows the Day of Atonement, giving God’s people an entire week of happy celebration (23:26–44). The sequence is important: first conviction, then cleansing, and then celebration.

The Word of God brings conviction and leads to repentance, but it also brings us joy; for the same Word that wounds also heals. “Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was

to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name” (Jer. 15:16, NKJV). “The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart” (Ps. 19:8). “Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart” (119:111, NKJV).

Assisted by the Levites, Nehemiah convinced the people to stop mourning and start celebrating. *It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.* The sinner has no reason for rejoicing and the forgiven child of God has no reason for mourning (Matt. 9:9–17). Yes, as God’s children we carry burdens and know what it is to weep (Neh. 2:1–2); but we also experience power that transforms sorrow into joy.

The secret of Christian joy is to believe what God says in His Word and act upon it. Faith that isn’t based on the Word is not faith at all; it is presumption or superstition. Joy that isn’t the result of faith is not joy at all; it is only a “good feeling” that will soon disappear. Faith based on the Word will produce joy that will weather the storms of life.

It isn’t enough for us to *read* the Word or *receive* the Word as others expound it; we must also *rejoice* in the Word. “I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure” (Ps. 119:162, NKJV). In Bible days, people sometimes hid their wealth in jars buried in the ground (Matt. 13:44; Jer. 41:8). If a farmer plowing his field suddenly discovered a jar filled with gold, he would certainly rejoice. There are great treasures buried in God’s Word, and you and I must diligently “dig” for them as we read, meditate, and pray; and when we find these treasures, we should rejoice and give thanks.

If we read and study the Word of God only from a sense of duty, then its treasures may never be revealed to us. It is the believer who rejoices in the Word, who delights to read and study it day by day, who will find God’s hidden treasures. “Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands” (Ps. 112:1, NIV). “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (1:2, NKJV).

Do you delight in God’s Word? Would you rather have God’s Word than food (119:103; Luke 10:38–42), or sleep (Ps. 119:55, 62, 147–148), or wealth? (vv. 14, 72, 137, 162) If you delight in His Word, God will delight in you and share His best blessings with you.

3. We must obey the Word (Neh. 8:13–18)

Obligation and *appreciation* are certainly strong motives for serving the Lord, but *celebration* is even stronger. When we obey the Lord and serve Him because we rejoice in Him, then our service will be a delight and not a drudgery. The old Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote, “Holy joy will be oil to the wheels of our obedience.” To the believer without joy, the will of God is punishment; but to the believer happy in the Lord, the will of God is nourishment (John 4:34). The Jews still had work to do in their city, and they needed the joy of the Lord to give them the strength to do it.

“When I think upon my God,” wrote composer Franz Josef Hayden, “my heart is so full that the notes dance and leap from my pen and since God has given me a cheerful heart, it will be pardoned me that I serve Him with a cheerful spirit.”

The Day of Atonement was celebrated on the tenth day of the month and the Feast of Tabernacles from the fifteenth to the twenty-first days. This meant that the leaders had just a few days available for getting the word out to the Jews in the surrounding villages that everybody was going to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. It is not enough to hear the Word of God; we must obey what it tells us to do (James 1:22–25). The people not only had joy in hearing the Word, but they also had “*great gladness*” in obeying it (Neh. 8:17, italics mine).

During the seven days of the feast, the Jews lived in booths made of branches and usually built on the flat roofs of their houses. It was a time for *looking back* and remembering the nation's forty years of wandering in the wilderness, when the people were homeless and lived in temporary shelters. But the feast was also a time for *looking around* at the harvest blessings from the hand of God. The Lord had given them a good land, and they were never to forget the Giver as they enjoyed the gifts (Deut. 8). The Feast of Tabernacles was also an occasion for *looking ahead* to the glorious kingdom God promised His people Israel (Zech. 14:4, 9, 16–20). It was a week-long festival of joyful praise and thanksgiving, focusing on the goodness of the Lord.

But the celebrating of the feast was not for enjoyment alone; it was also for enrichment and encouragement. "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). The world's joy is temporary and artificial; and when the joy is gone, people are left with even greater weakness and emptiness. But the joy that comes from the Lord is real and lasting and enriches our lives. God doesn't give us joy *instead of* sorrow, or joy *in spite of* sorrow, but joy *in the midst of* sorrow. It is not *substitution* but *transformation*.

Jesus illustrated this truth by the birth of a baby (John 16:20–22). The same baby that gives the mother pain also gives the mother joy! Her pain is not *replaced* by joy but *transformed into* joy. The difficult circumstances of life are "pregnant" with joy, and by faith we must give that joy time to be born.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a time for sending food and gifts to others, especially to those who were needy. The Jews had found joy in *hearing* the Word of God, but now they found joy in *sharing* the blessings of God. The mind grows by taking in, but the heart grows by giving out; and it is important to maintain a balanced life.

Nehemiah 8:17 does not teach that the nation had ignored the Feast of Tabernacles since the days of Joshua, because that was not so. The feast was celebrated during King Solomon's day (2 Chron. 8:13) and also when the Babylonian exiles had returned to the land (Ezra 3:1–4). It was not the *fact* of the celebration that was so special but *the way* they celebrated, for it appears that everybody participated enthusiastically. Because every family made a booth, some of the people had to move from the houses into the streets and squares of the city. Apparently in previous years, not all the Jews had made booths and lived in them for the week of the feast. They had given only "token" acknowledgment of the feast. Furthermore, the joyful attitude of the people was beyond anything the nation had ever seen. It was truly a week of joyful celebration that brought glory to the Lord.

Ezra continued the "Bible conference" during the entire week of the feast, day by day reading and explaining the Word of God. The combination of joyful fellowship, feasting, and hearing the Word must have strengthened the people greatly. Then the week concluded with a solemn assembly (Num. 29:35), after which the people returned to their regular daily schedules.

Did the blessings of the celebration last? Yes, for a time; but then the people became careless again, and the leaders had to bring them back to the Word of God. But the failure of the people is not an argument against special times of Bible study or celebration. Someone asked evangelist Billy Sunday if revivals lasted, and he replied, "No, neither does a bath; but it's good to have one occasionally!"

From time to time in the history of the church, God's Spirit has burdened people to pray, search the Scriptures, and confess their sins; and from these sincere spiritual exercises, He has seen fit to bring fresh life to His people. It happened in Nehemiah's day, and it can happen again today.

Can God begin with you?

“If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14, NIV).

Getz, G. A. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 688-690) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

7:73b–8:9. **When the seventh month** arrived **the Israelites** were **settled in their towns** (cf. 7:73a). The seventh month was September–October (see the chart “Calendar in Israel,” near Ex. 12:1). Then **the people** met near **the Water Gate** or the east wall (cf. Neh. 3:26, and see the map “Jerusalem in the Time of Nehemiah,” near 3:1) to hear **Ezra**, a **scribe** (cf. 8:4, 9, 13; 12:26, 36) and also a **priest** (8:2, 9; 12:26), **read** and teach **the Law of Moses** (the five books of Moses).

Ezra had returned to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., 14 years before Nehemiah, also with the blessing of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7). His primary purpose in going to his homeland was to teach the Jews God’s Law.

In Ezra 7:6, 11–12, 21 he was called a teacher. Of course, Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries (cf. Neh. 12:33, 36). Ezra’s descent from Eleazar, Aaron’s third son, is seen in the chart “Ezra’s Lineage,” near Ezra 7:1–5.

When Ezra first arrived in Jerusalem, 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 to and to obey the laws of God. A few years later Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and challenged them to trust God to help them rebuild the walls.

The effectiveness of Ezra’s ministry is also reflected in the people’s behavior after the walls were completed. The two-month building program was an interlude 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 (Neh. 8:1). This was **the first day of the seventh month**, the day which was to be the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24; Num. 29:1). Adults and children **who were** old enough **to understand** (Neh. 8:2–3) listened attentively all morning as Ezra **faced** west by **the Water Gate** (cf. v. 1).

Standing **on a ... platform** above the people **Ezra** read from the Law, while 13 men, perhaps priests (cf. v. 7), **stood** on the platform **beside him**. As he read, **the people ... stood** (v. 5). He then **praised the LORD, the great God** (cf. 1:5; 4:14).

The people’s response to the reading of the Scriptures and to Ezra’s praises must have been an emotional experience for this scribe and priest. Lifting **their hands** toward heaven they shouted **Amen! Amen!** in an expression of agreement with God’s Word. **Then they** fell on their knees and **bowed** low as they **worshiped the LORD** (8:6).

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 30,000 and 50,000 people (7:66–67). Possibly Ezra read sections of the Law in the presence of **all the people** (8:3), and then at certain times **the Levites** circulated among them and made **it clear** and explained (gave **the meaning** of) what Ezra had read as the people stood in groups (vv. 7–8).

The most gratifying thing that happened, of course, is that the people obeyed God’s Word. What they heard touched their emotions, for they wept as they heard **the Law** (v. 9). Apparently, they were remorseful over their past disobedience to the Law and contrite over their sins.

8:10–18. **Nehemiah** then encouraged the people to consider the **day ... sacred** and **to eat**, give to others in need, and rejoice in **the LORD**, their source of **strength**. Holiness and **joy** were to go together!

The next **day** the spiritual leaders—**heads of ... families** (i.e., heads of clans), **priests and ... Levites**—**gathered** to hear more of God’s Word from **Ezra**. Another response of the people was their celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. The sequence in chapter 8 is striking: intellectual response to the Word (vv. 1–8), emotional response to the Word (vv. 9–12), and volitional response to the Word (vv. 13–18).

The spiritual leaders discovered this instruction about **the feast** in Leviticus 23:37–43. This was celebrated from the 15th to the 22nd of **the seventh month** (Tishri). Since they discovered these instructions on the second day of the seventh month (Neh. 8:2, 13), the timing was perfect. They had exactly two weeks to prepare for it. So they had **the people** get **branches from** various kinds of **trees** (v. 15) and build **booths** (temporary shelters) in various places, including **the square ... by the Gate of Ephraim** (see the map “Jerusalem in the Time of Nehemiah,” near 3:1). This recalled their days of wandering in the wilderness (Lev. 23:43). Their celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was unmatched since **the days of Joshua**. When the altar was completed in 536 B.C. the people then celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:4), but here the **joy** and involvement was much greater. **Ezra read the Law** during the Feast of Tabernacles, because Moses had indicated that this was to be done every seven years (Deut. 31:10–13).

Mathews, K. A. (1998). The Historical Books. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 186). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

READING THE LAW (8:1–10:39)

The account of Ezra’s ministry is told in the third person. Ezra’s proclamation of the law began on the first day of the seventh month and continued probably each morning for one week. His reading of the law encouraged the exiles to rejoice and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in the proper way. By hearing the law, the people came under conviction, and collectively the nation recalled the evil of Israel’s past. The result was a covenant renewal in which they pledged themselves to the law.

Ezra Reads the Law (8:1–18). The last half of 7:73 introduces chapter 8. The seventh month was the most important month of the ceremonial calendar (see Lev. 23). On the first day of the month (see Num. 29:1), the people assembled and called for Ezra to read the law. The purpose of the reading was so they could understand the law. The people stood in reverence when the law was read; and their response included praise, tears, and joy. The Levites interpreted the law for those who did not understand its meaning.

After hearing the law, the elders urged Ezra to call for a general assembly of all the Jews to observe the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles). Tabernacles was traditionally celebrated for seven days at the time of harvest ingathering (Exod. 34:22). It commemorated God’s provision during the wilderness when Israel lived in temporary shelters or booths (see Lev. 23:33–43). For these exiles, this festival was particularly meaningful because they had experienced the second “Exodus” from Babylon. The booths, made of tree branches, were constructed in the city. Not since Joshua’s time had the feast been celebrated in this way. The law was carefully followed. The Jews set aside the eighth day (Lev. 23:36) for special assembly.

Simmons, B. E. (1972). Nehemiah. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible commentary (p. 260). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

The Reading of the Law (Neh. 8:1–18)

The passage.—On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest read publicly the law of God. It was read before the men and women, and it took from early morning until noon. When the people heard the words of the law, they began to weep. However, Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites reminded the people that they should rejoice rather than weep.

The next day the people gathered together again so the law could be explained to them. It was discovered that during the seventh month there was supposed to be a feast. The Jews were to take branches and build booths to dwell in for seven days.

Therefore, the people went out and got branches and built booths to dwell in during the feast. This feast had not been observed properly since the time of Joshua. During the observance, there was much gladness, and the law was read every day.

Special points —Why Ezra has not been mentioned in the book of Nehemiah up to this point is not easily explained. Quite possible he had been away in Babylon during the repairing of the wall. At any rate, as a priest, he was the appropriate one to read the law and instruct the people in it. Nehemiah, you will remember, was neither a priest nor a Levite.

The feast observed at the beginning of the month was the Feast of Trumpets. This was the festival of the new moon. The seventh new moon of the year was the most sacred of all during the year. During this month the Feast of Trumpets would be followed by the Day of Atonement. This then would be followed almost immediately by the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast commemorated the forty years of wilderness wanderings when the Israelites dwelt in tents.

Possibly the point being made in verse 17 that since the days of Joshua the feast had not been properly observed is that the Jews had not dwelt in booths.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ne 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.