

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 15 Reformation Days, part 2 (Nehemiah 8)**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **II. The Foundation of Reformation – Nehemiah 8 [Scripture]**

Note that “torah” occurs 9 times in this chapter.

#### **A. Delighting in the hearing of the word (Neh. 8:1-6)**

The audience consists of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. This seems to indicate that they didn't have their middle school, junior high, and senior high youth meet off by themselves for gabbing, games, and refreshments. This hearing of the word is marked by:

##### **1. Patience (Neh. 8:3a)**

Here was something like a five-hour reading of Scripture! They were not ruled by the clock.

##### **2. Attention (Neh. 8:3b)**

“All the people were attentive to the book of the law” – a genuine interest and desire for the Word of God.

##### **3. Reverence (Neh. 8:5)**

When the people stand at the reading of the torah, it is a mark of reverence for that Word. This is a proper custom for the people of God to follow. This example, however, is not prescriptive for all our worship assemblies. Note that Mary, in any case, *sat* at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching (Luke 10:38ff.), but a standing posture is certainly proper.

##### **4. Worship (Neh. 8:6)**

Here blessing and doxology are directed to Yahweh, the giver of the word. Does this not teach us that if the study of Scripture is not to degenerate into barren intellectualism, it must ever be mixed with praise and doxology and thanksgiving? Have you ever noticed how the Apostle tends to have a “knee jerk” reaction of praise in response to divine truth? (See Paul's ejaculations in Rom. 1:25; 9:5; Gal. 2:20; and 1 Tim. 1:17).

“Then they bowed down and, face to the ground, prostrated themselves before Yahweh” (Neh. 8:6b, NJB). They stand, they speak, and they kneel. This last posture signifies their submission to the authority of the word, their self-abasement and humiliation. Those who want to get back to “biblical” worship, who want to stand for reading of Scripture (v. 5) and to lift up their hands (v. 6a), must also bury their noses in the carpet [or tile] to be consistent. And why not? More Protestants should be caught kneeling in public worship!

### **B. Teaching for understanding of the word (Neh. 8:7-8)**

The Levites circulated among the people, perhaps doing exposition of the Word in small groups. Fensham recalls the similar teaching ministry of Levites under King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 17:7-9. Much ink has been spilt over the participle *mephorash* in 8b which qualifies the verb “read:”

- (1) Some hold that it means “translating” (i.e., from Hebrew into Aramaic).
- (2) Others hold that it means “making distinct,” or as an adverb, “clearly.”
- (3) Williamson (*WBC*) takes it as “paragraph by paragraph,” breaking it down into manageable chunks.

Probably the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> option is preferable: breaking it down and explaining the meaning. The intent, in any case, is to make the Word of God clear, to highlight the insight it holds, and to make its applications obvious.

### **C. Balancing our response to the word (Neh. 8:9-12)**

This assembly took place on the first day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month (v. 2), which was the “feast” of trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25 and Num. 29:1-6). The weeping of the people (v. 9) may have been over sin exposed through the reading of the torah. The weeping and sadness of verse 9 are balanced by the joy and gladness of verse 12. They celebrated “because they understood the words which had been made known to them.” But they had to be *ordered* by Nehemiah and company to be joyful (vv. 9-11). Note that this is a *social* joy, not a *selfish* joy (v. 10b). Three times the people are told that the day is “holy” (vv 9, 10, 11) and they are commanded to be joyful. Do you see the connection or the assumption? The assumption is that holiness is *not* glumness, but that holiness and happiness are the most congenial bedfellows! The last line of verse 10 contains the primary argument against sadness: “For the joy of Yahweh is your place of safety.” Perhaps there is the suggestion that ongoing sorrow and grief, while proper at times, can leave the people of God “unprotected”; the text implies that joy and delight in Yahweh fulfill a protective function in believers’ lives, keeping them, perhaps, from being swallowed in despair.

Our culture and even the church seem so hyped on fun that the contemporary people of God appear paranoid of the appropriate self-loathing that ought to characterize genuine new covenant people (Ezek. 36:31). However, there are always some among the Lord's sheep that focus on the disaster of their sins and sinfulness and forget Christian hope and joy, whose major tunes are all in a minor key, and who need to be told to add the tension of gladness to their grieving.

#### **D. Living under the control of the word (Neh. 8:13-18)**

The heads of households met for ongoing Bible study (v. 13). They found written in the torah the regulations about the Feast of Tabernacles (or, Booths; see Lev. 23:33-43, esp. 40,42-43; and Deut. 16:13-15, with the emphasis on joy in the latter passage).

There is a beautiful simplicity here:

“They found it written in the torah” (Neh. 8:14a)

“So the people went out” (Neh. 8:16a) (= their obedience)

Verse 16 indicates the various locations of their booths, while verse 17 emphasizes the uniqueness of the celebration (“from the days of Joshua the son of Nun”).

The celebration of Tabernacles, with the people camping out in their makeshift lean-tos, was an appropriate word to post-exilic Judah, as it should be to the Lord's people in all ages. Tabernacles was meant to force Israel to recall their tenuous post-Egyptian existence in the wilderness journey. In the midst of Israel's settled life in the Land, they were to remember their former hand-to-mouth existence, to recall how fragile life is. In the midst of what was also a harvest festival, they remember that life *can* be a wilderness, and that whether it has been manna (Exod. 16) or harvest (as in the Land), their only sustainer is Yahweh. They must never forget their humiliation in the wilderness (Deut. 8) or the One who sustained them through it.