

Nehemiah: Festival

Nehemiah 8:13-18

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

*The Lord's Day Evening
January 4, 2009*

We've been parked in Nehemiah for a couple of weeks now, and there's been an interval in which we were looking elsewhere over the Christmas period, so we need to remind ourselves just a little, I think, of the immense significance and uniqueness in some ways of what took place on this day, early September 444 B.C., in Jerusalem.

They had been summoned back into the city. And you remember for an entire morning, perhaps four or five hours, they stood in a square in Jerusalem and heard Ezra and a band of thirteen along with him read from the Law of Moses...read from the first five books of the Old Testament. There among the crowds that were gathered that day were thirteen others who translated from the Hebrew text into the Aramaic language, which after the exile was the predominant language that the Jews, including those who lived in Jerusalem, spoke. One gets the impression that they didn't just translate those Scriptures, but they also interpreted and perhaps even applied those Scriptures. What a day it was!

You remember that as they gathered that day and they heard the Law of God being read, it was a revival. It was an extraordinary act of the Holy Spirit bringing these people in Jerusalem and the towns and villages round about, bringing them back to a sense of God and of the majesty of His word. It was an extraordinary day. There had been days like it in history, in periods of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. And you remember as they heard the word of God being read, they began to weep...to weep because of their sin. Next Lord's Day we're going to turn the page to chapter nine of Nehemiah, one of the great chapters of confession in all of Scripture...extraordinary confession of their sin. But that's still in the future. They began to weep, and do you remember? Nehemiah exhorts them not to weep, but to rejoice. This was not a day for weeping; this was a day for rejoicing because "the joy of the Lord [verse 10] is your strength."

Now all the people have gone home, and it is the next day...and the heads of households, including priests and Levites, are going to be summoned back into

the city for more Bible study. You just can't get enough of the Bible. Let's turn to verses 13-18 of Nehemiah 8. Before we read the passage together, let's look once again to the Lord for His blessing.

Lord our God, we thank You for the Scriptures. We thank You for the Bible. We pray as we begin a new year that this might be a year in which we might find ourselves much in the Scriptures. Help us, O Lord, in our resolve to read the Bible, and study the Bible, and love the Bible, and pray over the Bible. We ask, O Lord, as we do so tonight here in this service, help us once again to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's word:

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. 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, 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." 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. And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. 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.

Amen. And may the Lord add His blessing to that reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Well, it's the next day. Evidently the women and children are at home. The heads of households and the priests and the Levites are gathered together once again in Jerusalem to hear Ezra (and perhaps some of the others) read and study together the Law of God. And what they discover as they read the book of Leviticus, the book of Deuteronomy, the book of Exodus — all three books make mention of the Feast of Booths, or the Feast of Tabernacles. It had been a long time since they had celebrated the Feast of Booths. But perhaps (and commentators conjecture) the festival hadn't been entirely forgotten. Perhaps it was being kept privately in people's homes, and perhaps in more family devotions, but the strict command to erect booths (huts, lean-to's, shanties) in Jerusalem and to gather together for seven days and then to have this solemn assembly at the end of the seven days — that had not been done in a very long

time.

You know, sometimes when you read Scripture you'll discover that it reads you. Sometimes when you read Scripture you have one of those moments and you think, "I've not seen that before...well, I must have seen that before! I've read that dozens and dozens of times." But it comes home to you as something new and fresh. I wonder if you've had that experience. You read the Bible and you discover something that God is saying to you, something that God is perhaps requiring of you that you knew was there...it's just that you ignored it. And now it's coming home to you with fresh force and power.

Perhaps it's a word about tithing. Perhaps it's a word about keeping the Lord's Day. Perhaps it's a word about honoring of parents. Perhaps it's a word that is specific to you tonight. You know what it is. God has been addressing you, speaking to you in these past days. Perhaps it's a word from the sermon this morning. And God is speaking to you through the Scriptures.

Well, that's what happened on this day. It wasn't just a personal thing; it wasn't just a familial thing; it was a collective experience of the people of God that God was requiring something of them that they had not been doing.

I. An act of obedience.

And that's the first thing I want us to see: an act of obedience. The Bible says we have to be doers as well as hearers of Scriptures. We're not to be just sermon tasters. We're not to be just sermon critics (yes, that one's nine points...that one's four points...that one we won't talk about)! We're to be doers of the word. The word is to read us and address us. "Little children, let no one deceive you," John says. "Whoever practices righteousness is righteous." That's what happens here. They discover in the book of Leviticus, in the book of Deuteronomy, in the book of Exodus...they read about the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles. It would take place in the seventh month after the Day of Atonement, which took place on the tenth of the seventh month. On the fifteenth of that month and running for a week there would be this entire week of celebration known as the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles. And they immediately obey. They immediately obey! There's a collective act of obedience on behalf of the people of God.

Now, there are two ways you can respond to a commandment in Scripture. The first is you can throw up your hands and say, "Legalism!" If I had a penny for every time I heard the word "legalism," I'd be a very rich man! What is legalism? Legalism is trying to earn the favor of God, trying to do something, trying to obey, trying to comply with the commandments of God in order that God may look more favorably upon me. Well, that's wrong. That's wrong in every part. We're not here this evening in order to try and win the favor of God. We are miserable

sinner. We've sung three hymns tonight, all of which have addressed that very issue — that we're miserable sinners.

“Nothing in my hands I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked, look to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.”

I can't win the favor of God by reading more Bible or praying more or attending church more. See? That's legalism. That's a good definition of legalism. Legalism is adding to the commandments of God. The Pharisees were adept at doing that. It's part of the encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees. They were adding to the commandments of God. The Judaizers that Paul is addressing in Galatia were trying to win the favor of God. They half believed in gospel and in grace, but they also believed in trying to obey in order to win the favor of God. Now, the Pharisees were adept at adding to the commandments of God. That's legalism.

I love...more than I can tell you, I love that section in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. It's in Chapter XX, and it's the Second Section, and it's the heart of *The Westminster Confession*. It's the heart of Presbyterianism. It's our roots:

“God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men....”

I love that. God alone is Lord of the conscience. We are to obey only insofar as God has commanded, no more and no less. Only God has the right to impose upon my conscience an ethical imperative. To go beyond that is legalism.

Now there's another error that's the opposite error. It's what we call antinomianism. There's legalism and there's antinomianism. Antinomianism loves to use the word “grace.” And because it uses the word grace, it sounds right. It sounds orthodox. It sounds very gospel: “Don't you be demanding anything of me, because I live under the umbrella of grace.” Oh, if I had a penny for every time I've heard that, I'd be a rich man, too! It is equally a plague, because grace changes. Grace gives a new heart — a new heart that doesn't say, “I don't have to obey God anymore, because I'm under the umbrella of grace. I'm a child of God. I'm a son. I'm an adopted heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ, and I don't need to obey anymore. So don't you force your ethical imperatives upon me.” No, grace changes. It gives me a new heart, a new desire, a new will, a new resolve. Because I'm a believer, because I've tasted grace, I want to obey. Because I love God, because He has loved me, I want to obey.

That's what you see here. What you see here is the evidence of true grace.

What's the evidence of true grace? That they have a desire to obey. They read a law, they read a command, they read an imperative, they read an ethic...in this case, it's the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles. It could be anything, but in this case it's the Feast of Tabernacles. And God is saying, 'You are to do this. This isn't a choice. This isn't just something for mature believers or elite believers, this is for everybody. This is a command that I'm making to all the people of God under the old covenant.' And they obeyed. It's a beautiful thing. They obeyed. They obeyed instantly. They obeyed willingly. They obeyed with all of their hearts. They did what they read in Scripture.

Now, my friends, there's an application there, isn't there? Are you reading something in Scripture addressing an aspect of your life? It's the first Sunday of the year. You've perhaps made a resolution...perhaps some of you have already broken it. You resolved to read the Bible, perhaps, a little more. What is it that God is saying in Scripture? 'This is how I want you to live your life; this is how I want you to be as a father; this is how I want you to be as a Christian; this is how I want you to be as a church member.' And are we doing it? Well, let these brothers and sisters of 444 BC be an example to us of how to not only read the Bible but do the Bible. An act of obedience.

II. An act of celebration.

Secondly, it was an act of celebration. I want to say something about the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles...Sukkot. The modern Jews celebrate Sukkot in late September or early October — it changes. It was the fifteenth day. It began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar. They were to bring branches. You know, children — boys, girls, this was great fun! You'd gather branches — olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches. You'd bring them to Jerusalem and you'd build. Those who lived in the city would build on the roof of their house. Those who did not live in the city would build elsewhere. Some of them built in the square, next to a wall...perhaps in the corner...that would mean you'd only need two walls and something by way of a roof. It was like camping, camping out for the night.

I mean, what child [except me!] doesn't like that? [*Laughter.*] I camped out one night in Britain. It rained. We got up early in the morning and went home. That was my experience of camping in Britain. It was not very pleasant. But we did camp in the south of France. That was like camping at Twin Lakes! With air conditioning and a fridge, and a cooker, and a bathroom about fifty steps away. Now, that's camping!

I can only imagine that children loved Tabernacles — to camp out for seven days, to cook out, to have roast lamb cooked outside on a barbecue for seven days, it was enormous fun. It was a joyful, joyous celebration.

Tabernacles commemorated two things. It was a reminder, of course, of the wilderness era. 'Remember how your forefathers lived for forty years in the wilderness, camping out with the stars of the Sinai Peninsula as their roof, eating manna and quail,' it said in a very forceful way. It was a vivid reminder of God's protection during a time of great hardship. God had protected them. God had led them all the way.

"All the way, my Savior leads me;
What have I to ask beside?"

In times of difficulty, in times of trial, in times of testing, God had been with them.

It was a reminder of the tenuousness of life. You know, living out in a tent, especially if it was raining...or living under branches that are full of holes, and it's windy and drafty and it's raining...it was a reminder of the tenuousness of life. Life is fleeting. Life is passing by, because "here we have no continuing city. We seek a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." We need to remember that.

On the first of January I was listening to [forgive me!] CNN on the radio. And the doctor who's Asian was doing a little spot about longevity of life. He was suggesting things like, you know, if you drink two cups of coffee you'd add a year to your life. If you drink a glass of red wine, you could add another six months to your life, and so on. It wasn't the nonsense that he was saying that was drawing my attention so much as what lay behind it: the insatiable desire to live forever, to live as long as possible, to find that elusive elixir of life.

What slavery...what bondage, forever looking for that elixir that will make you live as long as possible. A dear friend of this congregation in my hearing in the last few days said, "Oh, just let me go home to heaven and be with Jesus." Because we know what we are. We are the children of God. We know what we are. We are adopted heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. God has promised to us an eternal city. Tabernacles was a reminder of that — of the fleetingness, of the tenuousness of life.

But Tabernacles was also of course a harvest celebration. It's called in Exodus the Feast of Ingathering. You know, it's late September or early October. It's when all the fruit and all the cereal and all the crops have come in. It's ...well, some churches have Harvest Thanksgivings. It's partly based on that Old Testament ritual of the Feast of Booths, or the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Ingathering. It was a reminder that God provides, and whatever blessings you have, remember God has given them. What better a way to be reminded than to have to camp out for seven days under some myrtle branches in the wind and rain? Then you'll be grateful for that bed and a nice hot meal! I can't help but think that that's where we should be tonight. As Ligon was telling us this morning in the announcements of the extraordinary kindness and generosity of the people

of God here at First Presbyterian Church in giving, I had a friend calling me from London this afternoon. They're facing similar economic difficulties to the ones that we are in — tightening their belts and worrying about how to engage in certain acts of ministry as a consequence. I felt almost embarrassed to say to him how generous the people of God at First Presbyterian Church had been. No...how generous God has been to us. What a great God we have!

Tabernacles was a reminder of all those things.

III. Great rejoicing.

But you notice a third thing here. It's an extraordinary statement. We read at the end of verse 17, "And there was very great rejoicing." There was great joy. They had obeyed the commandment of God to celebrate the Feast of Booths, and they experienced great joy.

You know what that's saying? That joy comes through obedience. There's nothing like being at the center of the will of God. There's nothing like it. There's absolutely nothing to compare to knowing that you're in the very center of what God wants you to be and where God wants you to be. There's nothing like that. That's where contentment is found. Where can I find happiness? Where can I find joy? Lasting joy?

"Solid joys and lasting treasures,
None but Zion's children know."

Where can I find that? In obedience to God. In doing the will of God. And there is absolutely nothing about that that is counter to the idea of grace. These people in Jerusalem were doing precisely what God wanted them to do, and in the doing of it they found great joy and great contentment and great happiness.

There's a rabbinical saying that says that you've never seen joy until you've been to the Feast of Tabernacles at Jerusalem. Their joy was very great. You know, joy...joy is something that Paul commands. You know you can choose joy. You have this choice tonight. You do. I said last week — was it last week or the week before? — that some of you are very grumpy. And one of you who knows me too well says, "You were talking about yourself!" And I was. My wife was away. I had cause to be grumpy, I thought. Choose joy. Choose to be on the Lord's side. Choose to be where God wants you to be, because that's where you'll find happiness. The world can never bring you this happiness. The security that the world offers can never bring you the joy that these folk experienced on that day in 444 BC, because it came by their deliberate willingness to do what God had asked them to do.

Is there anything better for us in the year that lies ahead than to be right there? I

want to be where You want me to be. I want to do what You want me to do. As I read this in the Scriptures, as I read it and rightly interpret what I read in Scripture and it comes to me as a 'thus says the Lord, this is what I want you to do'—Lord, when I hear that, give me a willing heart. Give me a responsive heart. Give me a full heart.

You can be here tonight...I sometimes look around in any church (and ours is no different)...you can look at some of our teenagers and you can tell the ones who want to be there and the ones who don't really want to be there. They're there because Mama says they're going to be there, or Dad says they're going to be there. Well, I'm not speaking now to teenagers. I'm speaking to all of us. In our worship, are we saying I really want to be here because this is where I find pleasure, this is where I find happiness, this is where I find true and lasting joy?

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing," Paul says. Let's pray together.

Lord our God, we thank You for Your word. It is old and yet ever new, and it reads our hearts like an open book. We want tonight to be out and out for You. We want to know that joy, we want to know that happiness, we want to know that true contentment that is to be found in the very center of Your will and purpose for us. We want to be doers and not just hearers of the word. So bless us, and go on blessing us, because we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

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