

Broken and Restored

An Exposition of Nehemiah

¹³ Then on the second day the heads of fathers' *households* of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law^a.

¹⁴ They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month^b. ¹⁵ So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of *other* leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written^c." 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^d.

^a 8:13 **Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.** This was the follow-up to the worship gathering on the first day of the feast. Family leaders got together and asked questions of the Bible teachers. This was the ancient Hebrew version of small group ministry. When people are listening attentively to the word there will naturally be questions. It falls on church leaders to field those questions.

Having heard a long reading from the law of Moses, many questions arose. I would guess that some of the first questions were connected to this text:

Then Moses commanded them, saying, "At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, ¹¹ when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing. ¹² Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. ¹³ Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess." Deuteronomy 31:10-13

^b 8:14 **They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.** The questions here revolved around how specifically they could apply the commands of Moses regarding the Feast of Booths.

Based on the way Nehemiah applied the Scripture (Nehemiah 5:1-13), this must have been a Jubilee year in which debts were cancelled and slaves set free. Becoming a "doer" of God's word is often inconvenient and costly.

^c 8:15 **So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of *other* leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."** The people believed that they should do what God required under their covenant as a nation. Odd as this exercise may seem to us, the people were less concerned with appearances than with keeping the covenant. Their obedience serves as a reminder to us that we too are living in temporary shelters and entirely dependent on God to sustain us until we move out. Paul and Peter both used this illustration:

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 Corinthians 5:1

Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding *you*, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. 2 Peter 1:13-14, NKJV

^d 8:16 **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**

¹⁷ The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing^a. ¹⁸ He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day *there* was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance^{b, c}.

Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. There were no yards in the city, so rooftops and open spaces in the city turned into tent villages. Rather than a crowded mass of people wishing they could be elsewhere, this was a community of believers in covenant with God and each other. They lived out the words of James:

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. James 1:22

^a 8:17 **The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.** Everyone participated in this ritual. This was a joy rather than a drudgery because it was the joy of the Lord. Joshua's day would have been the first Feast of Tabernacles. Nehemiah said that there had never been such a satisfaction in doing what God said.

The words "great rejoicing" refer to the magnitude of their joy. It was big.

^b 8:18 **He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day *there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.*** The "he" likely refers to Ezra. The people celebrated daily and their feasting was set apart because it was centered on God's word.

^c 8:13-18 The meeting recorded here is the follow-up from the community gathering on the first day of the feast. The family leaders took application of the word seriously. They wanted to know just how they should respond in their own households.

The proper communication of God's word, modeled in this text, will always include these elements:

- Presentation of the word: It must be read in such a way that the people can understand it.
- Interpretation of the word: It must be explained accurately, because God only meant one thing when He said it.
- Application of the word: Because there are many applications, it must be connected to the lives of those who hear it.

The proper reception of God's word is also modeled here.

- Reverence for the word: You must develop a hunger to hear from God.
- Attention to the word: You must listen intently, loving God with your mind.
- Obedience to the word: You must seek to put what you have heard into practice.

Just as James called his readers to be doers of the word rather than merely (self-deceived) hearers, Ezra and company explained how to apply God's word to life. Here is what makes you a doer of God's word:

1. You earnestly seek out those who can equip you to handle it.
2. You take its commands personally.
3. You keep company with others who are likeminded.
4. You seek your joy in living its truth.

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