

Obedience to the Word

Nehemiah 8:13-18

Nehemiah 8:13-18 - *“Now on the second day the heads of the fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law.¹⁴ And they found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month,¹⁵ and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.”*

¹⁶ Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. ¹⁸ Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner.”

Background Notes

The year was 445BC. About a hundred years before this time, the Jewish people had returned to Jerusalem from their 70-year captivity in Babylon. Under the motivating ministries of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, they completed the rebuilding of their Temple, but the defensive wall that should have surrounded the city of Jerusalem remained in ruins. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had destroyed the Temple and devastated the city, including the city wall, in 586BC. So the wall remained in ruins even though the Temple was rebuilt.

Then, under the challenging leadership of Nehemiah, the wall around Jerusalem was finally constructed. The account of building the wall is given in the book of Nehemiah. Chapters 1 through 6 tell us all about the rebuilding of the wall. It was accomplished in 52 days, despite problems and opposition - a tremendous feat! And a great revival followed the rebuilding of the wall. Here in chapter 8 we see that the revival was centered about the Word of God.

The “feast in the seventh month” mentioned in verse 14 is the Feast of Tabernacles. This is one of the annual Feasts of the Lord, and it’s described in Leviticus 23. The Feast of Tabernacles lasts for a week, and is held in the middle of the seventh month (late September or early October on our calendar.) It commemorates the nation of Israel’s 40-year period of wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land.

During this festival the Jewish people were to look back and remember how God had preserved, protected, and provided for their forefathers as they traveled from place to place, living in temporary dwelling in the wilderness. So as a reminder, the people were told to construct temporary dwellings of sticks and leafy branches - little cabins or lean-tos ("tabernacles" or "booths" v14-15), and live in them for 8 days. These little structures were very fragile and could not protect the people from harsh weather conditions, so they were a reminder that it is God who protects and cares for them.

As Christians, we need to be reminded that God will care for us (Matthew 6:25-34). So often we're consumed with anxiety and worry about life's issues and problems. And if God calls us to travel through difficult life circumstances, it's encouraging to remember how He cared for His people through the wilderness. We need to remember that our Father in Heaven cares for us, and He watches over us every day!

By the way, the Feast of Tabernacles is still celebrated today. It's called Sukkot. In Israel, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jews still set up wooden structures in their courtyards, on their balconies, or even rooftops - and here in America, on their back yard decks or patios. It's a great opportunity to get to know our Jewish neighbors, because during this weeklong observance they will often sit in their back yard "booths" or screened tents in the evenings, reading Scripture.

Notice - verse 17 says that from the days of Joshua the people of Israel had not celebrated this feast as they did during Nehemiah's day. That's about a thousand years! Even during the glorious days of Kings David and Solomon, and during the great revivals under King Hezekiah and King Josiah, the people of Israel had not celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles as they did in Nehemiah's day. So a great revival took place when Jerusalem's wall was rebuilt!

Doctrinal Point

Obedience to the Word of God is the secret of joy and happiness.

Notice verse 17: *"There was very great gladness."*

The wall was built. A revival had begun. There was great blessing. There was great joy and rejoicing!

Why was there *"very great gladness"*? Because the people were obedient to the Word! God's Law prescribed the when and the why and the how to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. And the people obeyed!

Let's read the Scripture where God's Law instituted this Feast of the Lord, and prescribed how it was to be celebrated. Leviticus 23:39-43: *"Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the Lord for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath rest. ⁴⁰ And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. ⁴¹ You shall*

keep it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ⁴² You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, ⁴³ that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

The residents of Jerusalem heard God’s Law read aloud to them, as we saw in the early part of Nehemiah 8. They read the Word, they heard the Word, they understood the Word, and they appreciated the Word. And then they obeyed the Word - in every detail. They celebrated the feast. They made booths out of branches, and they sat in their booths. They obeyed the Word, down to the very last detail. No wonder there was joy and happiness and gladness! Obedience to the Word of God is the secret of joy and happiness and “*very great gladness*”!

Do you want happiness in your own life? Of course you do. We all want joy, and we all want to be glad. The secret to happiness is not pursuing a new hobby, or staying fit, or finding the perfect job. All those things have their proper places, but the secret to true joy is **obedience to the Word of God!**

Obedience is more than just reading the Bible, and it’s more than just understanding what the Bible says. Obeying is **doing** what the Word says!

Are we obeying the Word? Obedience to the Word of God is the secret to happiness - to being filled with joy in the Lord!

Practical Applications

1. Let’s obey the Word even though we may not have all the answers.

I bet there were some people in Nehemiah’s day who had some questions. They didn’t understand what the Feast of Tabernacles was all about, or why they had to cut branches and build little huts! And they may not have completely understood all the answers. Remember, the festival hadn’t been celebrated like this for a thousand years!

In the same way, we may not completely comprehend all the commands of Scripture. We don’t understand all the “whys.” We know that God set up regulations for our ultimate good – but sometimes it’s hard to understand why. But even if we don’t fully understand why God set up certain regulations, let’s obey the Word - even when we don’t have all the answers!

In 2 Peter 3:16, the apostle Peter mentioned some of the apostle Paul’s writings, and he said some things that Paul wrote are hard to understand. (I think we would all agree with that!) But we are to obey the Word, even though we may not completely understand the reasons why. Even if we don’t have all the answers, we are to obey what God has included in His Word.

Here's an example. What about the distinct roles of men and women, as seen in Scripture? The man is to take the responsibility for headship in the home, and men are to take the responsibility of leadership in the church. Why did God prescribe that? We may not understand the "whys," or the reasons why God set it up that way. The Bible does give some answers, but we may not completely comprehend them.

Even when we don't have all the answers, the practical application we're making here is: **"Let's obey the Word, even though we may not have all the answers."**

Let's be obedient to the Word.

2. Dads need to study the Bible more.

Verse 13: *"Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law."* The fathers got together to study the Word with Ezra, the priest and teacher.

As we've seen in chapter 8, **all** the people wanted to understand the Word. **All** the people gathered to hear Ezra read and explain the Word to them, so **everyone** could understand it. But the fathers, the heads of the households, realized their responsibility to understand even more of God's Word. So they got together to gain more insight into the Law of God.

Dads, you have a special responsibility to know and understand the Bible, because God's Word says you are the spiritual heads of your households. You are responsible before the Lord to give spiritual guidance and encouragement to your family.

Are you fulfilling that responsibility? These verses right here are a great model for us to follow. Dads, you need to study the Bible more!