

## International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

**Lesson Text: Nehemiah 8:13-18**

**Lesson Title: The Festival of Booths**

### Introduction

Nehemiah chapter eight begins the second half of the book of Nehemiah. The first seven chapters focus on the rebuilding of the wall and the final six chapters focus on the spiritual renewal of the people. As you come to chapter eight the wall of the city has now been completed and the work God gave to Nehemiah has been done. Nehemiah had also gone to great lengths to make sure the remnant living in Jerusalem was real Jews. The registry of their genealogy is recorded in Nehemiah chapter seven. Nehemiah now turns his attention to the spiritual aspect of building up the people of God. Rebuilding the wall was easy work compared to what Ezra and Nehemiah must now do. It only took a few months to build something physical for the people of God, but when you begin to deal with the spiritual building and becoming what God wants you to be, it takes a long time.

When you are focused on rebuilding walls you start with rubbish removal, foundation work, and then brick and mortar. When you are focused on rebuilding lives you start with God's Word. And that's exactly what Ezra and Nehemiah did. *"And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel...And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up...So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading"* (Nehemiah 8:1, 5, 8).

Ezra and Nehemiah worked closely together. Their ministries were different in many ways but they shared the same heart and burden for God's people. Both were in Jerusalem to call the people back to a right relationship with the Lord. And the only way to get there was by hearing and obeying God's Word.

When Ezra first arrived in Jerusalem, the spiritual condition of the people was sad (Ezra 9:1-4; 10:2, 10). As Ezra faithfully taught them God's Word, the people began to obey the laws of God. A few years later Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and also challenged the people to trust God to help them rebuild the walls. After the walls were completed the people wanted to hear more of God's Word. They

asked Ezra to "*bring the book of the law of Moses*" and teach it (Nehemiah 8:1). On this particular occasion the "*men and the women, and those that could understand*" (Nehemiah 8:3) listened attentively all morning as Ezra read from the Law, while 13 men, probably priests helped make clear to the people what was being taught.

The response of the people to the exposition of God's Word was that of worship, praise, and obedience to God. Furthermore, in response to God's Word they wanted to properly celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths. This feast was an important part of Jewish life and history and it is obvious that for a long time this feast had not been observed. It was while God's Word was being taught that awareness came of this need to celebrate the Feast of Booths. The Psalmist said, "*The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple*" (Psalm 119:130).

### **The Festival of Booths and the Instructions (Ezra 8:13-14)**

#### Verse 13

"And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law."

The people had gathered on "*the first day of the seventh month*" (Ezra 8:2) to hear Ezra read the word of God. They literally "*stood up*" (Ezra 8:5) for six hours, "*from the morning until the midday*" (Ezra 8:3) and listened attentively to God's Word expounded. Ezra didn't just read the law to the people, he read "*distinctly, and gave the sense*" (Ezra 8:8). That means he expounded and explained the text. Then, "on the second day" they "gathered" again to "understand the words of the law." And they did this every day for seven days. Can you imagine believers today standing to hear God's Word expounded for six hours and then coming back the next day for more?

Those gathered on the second day were "the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites." The "chief of the fathers" were heads of the houses. The "priests and Levites" were a representative company of spiritual leaders. Their purpose was to study the law of God with a desire to better understand it. "Ezra" was their able and qualified teacher. What is taking place here is regular planned systematic study of God's Word with a capable teacher at the helm. And the result is "understanding." The word "understanding" means "to look at, consider, have insight, and comprehend."

The text clearly indicates that Ezra is placing responsibility to "understand the words of the law" on this group of people. There is no excuse for God's people not knowing what God requires of them. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ you are responsible to read your Bible and seek the help of the Holy Spirit to understand and comprehend truth. If you have access to sound biblical teaching and preaching you should place yourself and those to whom you are responsible under that teaching and preaching (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24).

*Note: The people here remind us of the Bereans in the Apostle Paul's day. The Bible says, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). The Bereans wanted to know what the Bible said so they literally "ransacked the pages."*

#### Verse 14

"And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:"

One of the truths the people "found written in the law" as Ezra read was "the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses" concerning the Feasts of Booths. According to Ezra 3:4, the Feasts of Booths (also known as the Feast of Tabernacles) was celebrated by the first group of exiles that returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. However, it seems that in the years following the first groups return, the celebration of this feast had stopped. When the people heard the Word of God read and explained they realized the need to reinstate this meaningful celebration.

"Dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month" is a reference to the Feast of Booths also called the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feasts of Tabernacles was one of three pilgrimage feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16) the Israelites were to observe and is the last in this series of God-ordained festivals (Leviticus 23:33-43). This festival is connected with a vital part of Israel's salvation history, namely, God's provisions for the nation during her wilderness journey. It was a time to celebrate the past by looking back at what God had done for them in saving them and providing for them. The people are celebrating in obedience to the Word of God. The feast of the tabernacles was a time to celebrate the past, they looked on the past, what God had done through them and with them through the wilderness wanderings, how God had put them in tents, and how God had led them all the way through. And what that says to us today is that when we come to God's house there

ought to be celebration of the past, we ought to rejoice in what God has done for us in the past (Psalm 68:19; 103:2; 116:12).

Scripture mandated that the Feast of Booths was to begin on the 15th day of the "seventh month." That would be our September-October months. The feast was to last for seven days. The eighth day was to be a solemn assembly (discussed under verse 18).

### **The Festival of Booths and the Proclamation (Ezra 8:15)**

#### Verse 15

"And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written."

When the people realize they have disobeyed God's Word in failing to keep this feast, they "published and proclaimed" it "in all their cities, and in Jerusalem" which means they had it posted in all the cities in Jerusalem. It was the desire of the people that all Judah be involved in this celebration. Worship is not about a selected few. It is about all of God's family coming together to celebrate God's salvation and provision.

"As it is written" means everything was carried out according to God's Word. The requirements of this feast were not left to the people's discretion. They must follow God's Word. One of the requirements surrounding this feast was the building of a temporary shelter or "booth." We might refer to the shelter as a type of "lean to shed." In preparation of the "booths" the people were to "go forth unto the mount," or, go to the hills and "fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees." Leviticus 23:40 also mentions the use of "*willows of the brooks.*" All of these "branches" from the different types of trees would be leafy branches and sturdy trees that would be used to make the "booths."

The shelter must be at least four feet long, four feet wide, no more than 30 feet high, and have at least three sides. Its roof was covered with enough leaves and straw to provide shade without blocking out the view of the stars at night. The "booth" could be decorated as attractively as possible. To fulfill the scriptural requirement of "dwelling in booths," the people must spend more time in their

"booths" during the week of the feast than in their homes. Sounds like the people were gearing up to have a "heavenly camp meeting!"

While believers today are not required to literally build "booths" and camp out for a week, we are required to prepare for worship. The people of Judah took time to hear the word of God, time to meditate upon its truth, time to invite everyone to get ready to observe the feast, time to prepare the "booths" and then spend the actual time God required. Compare that to the average time a believer today prepares and spends with God in worship. It is embarrassing!

### **The Festival of Booths and the Celebration (Ezra 8:16-18)**

#### Verse 16

So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim."

"So the people went forth" speaks of the quick and precise obedience of the people to the word of God. Their obedience is impressive. "Five general locations are listed for placement of the booths; the roof, personal courtyard at their home, courtyard at God's house, in the street, and at the gate of Ephraim. Those living in Jerusalem naturally have two options in this regard that visitors to Jerusalem do not have: the rooftops of personal houses and the courts (or courtyards) of those houses, where animals are kept. Those who come from outside Jerusalem might find relatives who can share those two locations, but the visitors would probably go to the courtyard at God's house, the street at the water gate or the gate of Ephraim. The "gate of Ephraim" is located about a third of a mile to the northwest of "the water gate," close to the temple mount (2 Kings 14:13; 2 Chronicles 25:23).

#### Verse 17

"And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness."

"And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths" indicates that everyone participated in the celebration. Both young and old had heard Ezra expound the law so it is fitting that "all" participate. The same holds true today. Those who hear the word of God and receive it can participate and celebrate. They "sat under the booths" are striking words. Try to picture the

scene in your mind as many of these returned exiles sit with their families and neighbors for the first time and celebrate God's deliverance and provision for their nation. This scene should motivate each of us to pray for a revival and a return to biblical worship so we could be with our families and friends in an attitude of worship and thankfulness.

"For since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so" does not mean the Feast of Booths had not been observed for that length of time. "Jeshua" of course is a unique spelling of Joshua. In Nehemiah and Ezra's mind, the significance of the Feasts of Booths was now being experienced in the manner God desired for the first time since the days of Joshua. "And there was very great gladness" supports that interpretation. Nehemiah is saying no such joyous celebration of this festival had occurred since the time the people of God were actually coming out of the wilderness journey when God's provisions were fresh on their mind.

*Question: What was it that made this celebration of the Feasts of Booths so joyous? What is it that makes worship special and joyous for you? Could it be the fact that God's Word is the basis for what is being done? Could it be the fact that the leadership is not calling attention to themselves but rather to God's Word? Could it be the people have an obedient and responsive heart?*

### Verse 18

"Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner."

"Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God" refers to the continual and systematic reading of God's Word. The implication here is that this was a Sabbatical year which means this type of reading was commanded (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). The systematic reading of God's Word was vital to the worship life of the Israelite. It is also vital to the worship life of the New Testament believer.

"And they kept the feast seven days" emphasizes their complete obedience to God's Word (Leviticus 23:34; Numbers 29:12-34; Deuteronomy 16:13). "On the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner" follows God's command in Leviticus 23:36 which says, *"Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: on the eighth day shall be an holy convocation unto*

*you; and ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: it is a solemn assembly; and ye shall do no servile work therein."*

Holding or keeping a "solemn assembly" on the last day was evidence that the entire feast celebration had been carried out according to God's Word. On each of the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles an offering made by fire unto the Lord was to be offered. The sacrifices to be offered on the "eighth day," or the "solemn assembly," are listed in Number 29:12–38. There were to be sacrificed two rams, and fourteen lambs, and bullocks diminishing by one a day from thirteen on the first day to seven on the last. These formed the burnt sacrifices. The sin offering on each day was one kid of the goats. On the "eighth day" the burnt offering consisted of one bullock, one ram, seven lambs, and the sin offering, as before, of one kid of the goats. Thus there were offered in all, in the eight days, seventy-one bullocks, fifteen rams, one hundred and five lambs, and eight kids, beside meat and drink offerings. The final day of the feast or the "eight day," is a "solemn assembly." A "solemn assembly" means no work could be done. It was a sober and somber occasion that was designed to capture the feelings of significance and joy over the feast days that had just been celebrated. There was also a note of sadness mixed in with the "solemn assembly" because it represented the final day of the feast.

Our worship services and meetings today are often so fast paced that it almost has become a drive through religious experience. When was the last time you felt a note of sadness because the Lord's Day or a particular time of worship had come to an end? In the old brush arbor camp meetings of by gone years the congregation would sing the old song, "God Be With You Till We Meet Again" at the close of the last service. They felt a sense of sadness at the thought of departing from worship and the fellowship they had in Christ. May the Lord revive those feelings and thoughts in our hearts!

## **Conclusion**

Ezra and Nehemiah were given a wonderful opportunity to not only rebuild walls but rebuild lives as well. We who teach and preach should learn from their example and take this example to heart. Helping people "understand" God's Word is a high and holy calling. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the other leaders were not satisfied simply to read the Law to the people. They wanted them to know what it meant and be able to apply it to their lives.

As a result of the efforts of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the other leaders, the people of God restored the celebration of the Feasts of Booths and were able to celebrate the

special event the way God wanted it celebrated. God's Word still creates change in the lives of all who hear and heed it. May we return to a reading and understanding of God's Word in order that we may celebrate our salvation and live in joy.

Amen.