

May 11, 2025

Nehemiah 8:13-18

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ 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." 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. ¹⁷ And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. ¹⁸ 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.

Scriptures for further study:

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Acts 17:11

Galatians 2:14

Ephesians 1:3

Ephesians 1:7

“The family heads were responsible for the lifestyle of their families. Here they wanted to practice what Deut. 6:4-9 commands, that all the people, not just the priests, were to know and talk about the Word.”

-Mervin Brenneman

“The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers states that all believers in Christ share in his priestly status; therefore, there is no special class of people who mediate the knowledge, presence, and forgiveness of Christ to the rest of believers, and all believers have the right and authority to read, interpret, and apply the teachings of Scripture.”

-John Fesko



The Hand of God in Our Joy Nehemiah 8:13-18

BIG IDEA: True security and joy aren't tied to the strength of a house or fill of a fridge, but in God, who is protector and provider.

OUTLINE

1. Study of God's Word
2. Conformity to God's Word
3. Joy from God's Word

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These “Sermon Discussion Questions” are designed for study during the week for believers in a wide variety of ages & stages in their walk with Christ.

1. How do you respond when you’re hungry and the food that you want isn’t in the fridge or pantry? Or what feelings do you experience when the AC breaks in the middle of a scorching summer heat wave?
2. Refer to Nehemiah 8:13. Is the Word prevalent in your life? Do you frequently seek to connect the Word in most discussions or situations?
3. Refer to 8:14-16. In what ways is your life out of conformity with God’s will and Word?
4. Refer to 8:17. Would others say your life is consistently characterized by joy? What tends to impact your joy?

“But in addition to this blessing, Christ has also given to the church gifts: ‘And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up the body of Christ’ (Eph. 4:11–12). The shepherds and teachers of the church are priests just like the rest of the body of Christ, but the Spirit uniquely gifts them so they can equip the church for their own growth in grace and the proclamation of the gospel.”

-John Fesko

“Scripture is like a working museum of which the Spirit is the Curator, showing us around and explaining the wonders of the mind of the Maker. In this museum we are taken behind the scenes to learn from God Himself. In growing to know God, therefore, there is no substitute for the discipline of Bible study and Scripture reading and meditation.”

-Sinclair Ferguson

“Feasts were major community events occurring throughout the year that recognized God’s work and presence with His people. They were a common component of ancient religious practice. Each major Israelite feast recognized a specific aspect of God’s saving work. Every member of Israelite society participated in feasts.”

-John Swann

“It could be tempting for the Israelites to sit in their houses after a great harvest and say, ‘Look at what we did and how we have profited.’ Living in booths for a week reminded them that their success in life was wholly on account of the Lord’s grace. He had brought them to the good land and could just as easily take them out of it. A tangible reminder of His provision showed the Israelites they must always trust Him alone for their supply.”

-R.C. Sproul

Praise to Jesus. Dedicate time today to offer praise to Jesus for his priestly stature, which means all believers live in the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. We can ask the Holy Spirit for understanding, knowledge, forgiveness from Christ, and have the right and authority to read, interpret, and apply the teachings of Scripture. Praise God for the ultimate reminder of God’s provision of eternal life through the bread of life, Jesus Christ, found in the Lord’s supper, and for God’s physical and spiritual protection from life’s enemies in the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Repentance through Jesus. Spend time in prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the areas of your life that are not conformed to God’s Word and will. Confess these areas and repent by conforming all areas of your life to God’s Word.

Consecration to Jesus. Followers of Jesus are guaranteed provision for all of our needs forever and are protected by God from physical and spiritual enemies; therefore, let us rejoice in God, who is our protector and provider, and seek to connect true joy found in the Word in every and all discussions and situations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Last Sunday, we learned that Ezra gathered the people to hear the Law of Moses on the 1st day of the 7th month, Tishri, on the Hebrew calendar sometime in September or October. The message this Sunday is from Nehemiah 8:13-18, where we learn that it is the 2nd day of the 7th month. The leaders of the community took up their responsibility for studying the Law, realizing that they were in the month of the Feast of Booths, or the feast of the seventh month (Leviticus 23:33-43). The people kept this feast by living in temporary dwellings made from branches to commemorate how they had lived in booths in the wilderness after God had brought them out of Egypt (Leviticus 23:43).

- ESV Study Bible

FOR FAMILIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

These questions are written to aid parents in leading family devotions with their children.

1. As Ezra continued to read God's Law to the Israelites, what did they discover in verse 14? (They found that God had ordained a festival called the Feast of Booths. This Feast and the others in the Old Covenant sought to be a reminder of who God is and what He has done in the past. These festivals or feasts sought to remind God's people of God's grace and mercy in His plan of redemption. The Feast of Booths sought to remind the Jews of God's grace in watching over His people in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land.)

2. According to verse 17, what was the reaction of the Israelites as they took part in this Feast of Booths? Why do you think they reacted this way? (Verse 17 ends by saying they were "greatly rejoicing". The Bible repeatedly tells us that when we follow God's ways that we will have great joy even in the midst of tough circumstances. The angel spoke of this to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus when he announced the "good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10). Jesus spoke about this in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12. The Psalmist wrote of this in Psalms 1 and 2.)

3. Why would God want His people to celebrate regular feasts or festivals? What are the feasts in the New Covenant? Or what is the rhythm of the Christian life in the New Covenant that Jesus started? (The main reason that God built rhythms in for His people is due to our sinful forgetfulness about God's character, God's Word, and God's promises. We live under the New Covenant since Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Covenant feasts. Our main rhythm now is the weekly rhythm of rest for one day and work for six days. We start the week with the Lord's Day as we gather to worship. We spend a day with God's people and remind ourselves of the victory of Christ, and we look forward to the return of Christ. In the New Covenant, Jesus ordained the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper to be signs and seals of the covenant of grace. They are signs as they point us to Jesus for our salvation and to His strength for our faith journey. They are seals as God puts His stamp of faithfulness on these sacraments. Therefore, we can rest in Him.)

Scriptures for further study:

Leviticus 23:37-40

Deuteronomy 16:13-15

Psalms 16

Hebrews 4:1-16

FOR STUDENTS

Scriptures for further study:

Leviticus 23:34-43

Deuteronomy 8:2-3

Hebrews 11:13-16

Psalms 16:11

1 John 5: 2-3

1. In verse 13, the leaders returned to study God's Word more deeply. How often do you seek to grow in your understanding of Scripture? What helps or hinders your desire to study the Bible?

2. When the people discovered God's command to celebrate the Feast of Booths, they immediately obeyed (vv. 14–16). What does this teach us about how we should respond when we learn something new from God's Word?

3. The Feast of Booths reminded the people of God's provision and protection during the wilderness journey. What are some specific ways God has provided for or protected you in your life?

4. In verse 17, the people were filled with "very great rejoicing." What's one thing that tends to steal your joy? How can God's Word help you rediscover joy even in the middle of challenges?

5. The booths were temporary shelters, reminding Israel that their journey on earth wasn't forever. How does remembering that this life is temporary help shape the way you live and trust God today?

6. What's one way you can intentionally connect Scripture to your everyday life this week—at school, home, with friends, or in prayer?

FOR SEEKERS AND NEW BELIEVERS

1. The people of God were not only to read and proclaim God's word, they were also commanded to enact God's word by rehearsing and reliving the story of the wilderness journey.

QUESTION: Why is seeing, experiencing, and reenacting a story a powerful way of learning or reinforcing biblical truth?

QUESTION: How does this underscore for us the power of both the preached word and the celebration of the sacrament?

2. The Feast of Booths was to serve as an annual reminder of God's provision and protection in the wilderness. Without such regular reminders, God knows how easy it is for us to forget his past faithfulness.

QUESTION: How might you take some time, even this week, to recall specific instances of God's faithfulness throughout your past, and give him all the praise!

3. When the people read God's word and the command to celebrate this festival, they immediately and joyfully obeyed.

QUESTION: In what ways do you and I need to be challenged to more obediently live out God's word and be doers rather than merely hearers of God's word?

Read 1 John 5:2; Romans 6:17; Ephesians 6:6; James 1:22.

4. The Feast of Booths would have served as a great witness to those non-Israelites who lived and did business in and around Jerusalem.

QUESTION: In your own faith journey, how have you seen some of the major church seasons provide a powerful witness to you? Perhaps Easter, Christmas, or Thanksgiving church celebrations have made a positive impact on you?

5. The booths were a reminder of the temporary structures in which God's people lived during their time in the wilderness. But we should all be reminded that we, too, are just aliens and sojourners for a brief time here on earth. This present life (as well as our bodies) is tenuous and temporary.

QUESTION: Do you believe that a better (heavenly) country awaits? How can we learn to put our hope in something more permanent? How can the gospel of Jesus Christ give us assurance of lasting promises and life that is eternally secure?

The Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People



The Ancient of Days, William Blake, 1794.

About the artwork and artist.

The Ancient of Days, found in prophecies of Daniel, is the subject of William Blake's engraving in which he shows us the Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People, the sermon series title for Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Ancient of Days is the cover art for Blake's Poem Europe: a Prophecy (1794). The Ancient of Days is a name for God the Father, whom the prophet Daniel spoke of in Daniel 7, where he saw Jesus, the Son of Man, "given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

Blake's poem "Europe", depicts a world filled with suffering based on the political climate of Europe and politics in England in the 1790s. It is appropriate in light of the suffering of God's people described in Ezra and Nehemiah. The artwork by Blake serves to remind and encourage God's people to know that He is still active and on the move with His plan of redemption despite their surroundings and circumstances. William Blake (1757-1827) was committed to connecting the prophecies and visions of the God of the Bible with the events in his country; the poet, printmaker, and painter was unrecognized and died impoverished. Despite their circumstances, William and his devoted wife Catherine, whom he taught to read and write, enjoyed a happy marriage and life together.

Today, William Blake is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language and one of the most original visual artists of his day.

Barker, (2004) (Barker, William Blake 1757-1827, 2004)

Introduction to Nehemiah

From January to May 2024, we heard sermons from the Book of Ezra. The introduction to Ezra, recorded sermons, and discipleship resources can be found on our church website at this address; <https://www.fpcrome.org/pdd-ezra/>

Ezra and Nehemiah were, for centuries, received as one book narrating the return of God's exiled people to their land, as under Persian rule they were allowed to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem. These two books cover three different waves of returning exiles, from 538 to 433 BC. But they tell one story: the restoration of God's covenant people according to his Word—which they are now called afresh to obey.

This restoration required, first of all, the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstitution of ceremonial worship. The first leader, Zerubbabel, led the initial wave of exiles back to Jerusalem to accomplish this goal (Ezra 1–6). The second wave came more than half a century later, led by Ezra, who rebuilt not the temple but the people, teaching them—and calling them to obey—the law of Moses (Ezra 7–10).

Thirteen years after Ezra arrived, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. He first led the people to rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 1–6). Then, along with Ezra, he sought to restore the people (Nehemiah 7–13) as God's holy nation, followers of his Word.

The restoration was not complete, however. These books picture God's people regathered but struggling; they are poor subjects of a foreign king; their city is devastated; enemies oppress from without; sin threatens from within. We see the faithful hand of God mercifully preserving his people according to his promises. We also see the dire need for the perfect fulfillment of God's promises in the salvation accomplished by his Son. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible.)