

Nehemiah 8:13-18

Overview

Moses prescribed three appointed times in the seventh month, at the beginning of Israel's agricultural year:

<i>Ref in Lev 23</i>	<i>Appointed Time</i>	<i>Date</i>
23-25	Feast of Trumpets	7/1
26-32	Day of Atonement	7/10
33-36	Feast of Booths	7/15-22

When the Jews returned to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity, restoration of these feasts was high on their list of priorities. In Neh 8-10 we have a record of events that reflect all three of these appointed times.

- 7:73-8:12 records an assembly on the first day, corresponding to the feast of trumpets.
- 8:13-18 describes their rediscovery and celebration of the feast of tabernacles.
- ch. 9-10 describe a time of fasting and confession, very similar in spirit to the Day of Atonement. Curiously, it is not at the right time. It takes place on the 24th day of the month, two days after Booths, rather than on the 10th day, between Trumpets and Booths.

Today we study their celebration of the Feast of Booths, recorded in 8:13-18. We will see the importance of three things in serving the Lord:

- Who? Husbands and fathers should lead their families in seeking out the Lord's will.
- What should we do? Obey the Scriptures completely.
- How should we do it? We should rejoice in serving the Lord.

13, Who?

on the second day were gathered.--The great Bible reading on the feast of trumpets was followed by another Bible study on the second day. Note two contrasts between the two meetings.

1. On the first day, Ezra (5) teamed with the Levites (7-9) to teach the people. Now the priests and Levites are coming with the people to Ezra to learn more. Though they are supposed to be the teachers of the people, we noted two weeks ago that the priests had failed in their teaching ministry, and Ezra was distinguished in his diligence to learn the Scriptures. But he had them organized well enough to explain what he read in the

meeting the day before. Why do they now come for further instruction?

2. On the first day, the meeting was attended by all the people, including not only men and women but also children (2,3). Now the only lay people represented are “the chief of the fathers of all the people.”

All of the people heard the reading, but it was “the chief of the fathers” who took the initiative to probe deeper and learn more. In fact, because they are mentioned first, it’s likely that they are the reason the priests and Levites are here. We can imagine that as the Levites explained the law on the first day, the fathers probed them with questions and asked for further explanation that the Levites could not answer. So the fathers bring them to Ezra the scribe the next day for further study.

There are two important lessons here for us, one concerning the difference between men and their families, the other focusing on the role of clergy and laity.

Men and fathers should lead their families in spiritual matters.--To judge by our modern society, we might be surprised that it isn’t the women who led the delegation to go see Ezra. Women often seem more inclined to spiritual matters than men are. Even in the Bible, we have examples like Deborah who outshine their men (Judg 4-5). Consider the rapid growth of women clergy in churches that ordain women (like the United Methodist Church), and the corresponding decrease in men. Even forty years ago, in the large churches that I attended as a boy, the work of the church was largely managed by women, leading the missionary committee, the education committee, and so forth.

This may be the inclination of the genders, but our inclination is polluted by our sin. The NT is clear that men should lead in spiritual matters, as we see in Neh 8. For example,

1 Cor 14:34, Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.³⁵ And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

1 Tim 2:12, But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

Family leaders should hold their teachers accountable.--The fathers here are not satisfied with the level of understanding they receive from the priests and Levites, and bring them to Ezra to get further understanding. They are like the Bereans in Acts 17, who respect the input of spiritual “authorities,” but take the individual responsibility to search out from the Scriptures “whether those things are so.” It is the responsibility of fathers to know the Scriptures and exercise discernment in their association with spiritual groups. People are like sheep, and naturally want to submit themselves to powerful leaders who will take over all responsibility for them. But this is not to be the pattern in God’s church. There, the responsibilities of both elders and people are different.

Elder: In the NT, the notion of “leader” (Greek *hod8gos*, *hod8gew*) is applied to both men and God, but when applied to men is always negative (e.g., “blind leaders of the blind”). Elders are

told not to lord it over God’s heritage, but to be examples to the flock (1 Pet 5). Hebrews does speak of “them that have the rule over you” (13:7, 17, 24), but the word there (*h8geomai*) has the sense of giving careful attention to, rather than dominating, and reflects the role of the overseer. Our Lord taught (Matt 20:25-28),

Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. ²⁶ But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; ²⁷ And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: ²⁸ Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

People: Correspondingly, the people do not give up all their authority to their overseers. The example of the Bereans is important, receiving with all readiness what the noted Rabbi from Jerusalem had to say, but then checking him out from the Word of God (Acts 17:11).

14-17, What? Obey the Scriptures

This is a chiasmic execution paragraph. First we read the command, with its two elements. Then we read how the people carried it out.

<i>The Law, Lev 23</i>	<i>Reading, 14-15</i>	<i>Execution, 16-17</i>
	¹⁴ And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses,	
42 Ye shall dwel in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwel in booths :	that the children of Israel should dwel in booths in the feast of the seventh month:	and sat under the booths :
40 ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook;	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.	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. ¹⁷ And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths ,

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Their obedience was detailed, public, complete, and meaningful.

Detailed.--Compare Lev 23:40, 42 with what was done here: gather the branches and dwell in booths. They read the law, and they did it. They didn't try to explain it away, or spiritualize it.

Public.--v. 15 records "they found written in the law ... that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities" The reference is probably to the repeated phrase "holy convocation" *miqra*) *qodeš*, which dominates the discussion of the feasts: 17 of the 22 occurrences of *miqra*) are in this phrase in Lev 23 and Num 28-29, the "feast" chapters; compare especially Lev 23:2, 4, 37, which use the expression as the object of the verb *qr*). *qr*) means "to call, to summon," and "convocation" means "call together," from the Latin *con* "with, together" + *vocare* "call." *mqr*) "The law clearly teaches that the feasts are times when the people are to be summoned, and that's the lesson that Ezra and his contemporaries draw with respect to booths.

This was not something that people could do by themselves. In every age God has ordained that his people should assemble together to worship him.

- Under the old covenant, he enjoined a series of holy convocations, times when the people are called together to worship him. Note that they do not simply assemble of their own volition, but come together because they are called together at the command of the Lord.
- The Lord Jesus promised his presence wherever "two or three are gathered together unto my name" (Matt 18:20). Like the Jews, we are summoned to him (Matt 11:28 "come unto me"; John 10:16, bringing the sheep into one fold). This is why we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb 10:25).
- Heaven itself is viewed as a great assembly of God's people: Heb 12:22-23, the "general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven." Compare the vision in Rev 5.

Complete.--v. 16 "every one," v. 17 "all the congregation." It is a blessing when the church as a whole follows the Lord. Conversely, when some disobey, it can bring disaster on the company as a whole:

- Josh 7, Achan brought defeat on the nation Israel because he disobeyed the Lord with regard to the spoil of Jericho.
- Acts 5:12ff, after the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was judged, the church experienced a burst of blessing.

To be a Christian means to be gathered with a local body, and that in turn means that our conduct is no longer solely our own concern. If we disobey the Lord individually, the body will suffer.

Meaningful.--v. 17 has puzzled some: "for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so." In fact, there had been other feasts of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:4; 1 Kings 8:2, 65; 2 Chr 5:3; Judg 21:19 at harvest time; perhaps 1 Sam 1:3). The comparison must be to the *manner* of their celebration rather than the *fact* of it. Agriculturally, Tabernacles fell at harvest time, analogous to our Thanksgiving. Williamson notes that people often constructed booths in the fields as harvest approached to watch over the crops and guard against

pilferage (Isa 1:8; 5:2), and suggests that they may have fallen into the practice of using these booths to celebrate the feast. But this would lose sight of the real significance of the feast, which was (Lev 23:43) “that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.” This was not just a feast for the sake of holding a feast. It was a reminder that they were a people redeemed from slavery. This generation, newly returned from captivity in Babylon, understood this better than any previous one since Joshua.

The lesson here is that the Lord seeks more than mere outward conformity to some pattern. He wants us to enter into the meaning of the commandment. Compare what we saw last week in Isa 58, how he condemned their outward form of the day of atonement when it was not accompanied by true inner contrition. When we obey the Lord, we should strive to understand what his commandment is intended to achieve, and we should enter wholeheartedly into that purpose.

How? With Rejoicing

17b And there was very great gladness.--This was actually part of the command, Lev 23:40, “ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.”

Joy is actually an intrinsic part of worship. In worship, we are telling the Lord how wonderful we think he is. How sincere would our worship sound if we proclaim it with a long face and downcast heart?

Compare Esther 4:2, the law in the Persian court (where Nehemiah served) that “none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.” It was the conceit of the Persian kings that they were so glorious, to be in their presence must bring joy to anyone’s heart, and so they simply outlawed sadness in their presence. This is probably why Nehemiah was fearful when the king detected his sadness over the state of Jerusalem, 2:2.

How much more should we be joyful when we gather to worship the Lord? The Scriptures exhort this both positively and negatively:

- Positively, Psa 100:1,2, “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord. ... Serve the Lord with gladness.” The second half of the psalm relates this to the basis for this joy: “be thankful unto him.” Cf. Psa 103:2, “forget not all his benefits.”
- Negatively, compare Moses’ words in Deut 28:47-48: “Because thou servedst not the LORD thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; ⁴⁸ Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things.” If you aren’t happy in the Lord’s service, perhaps you’d like to try another master for a while.

David’s psalms show that this does not mean that we can’t cast our cares on the Lord. In spite of the custom of the Persian court, Nehemiah as a trusted courtier of the king was able to show his sadness over the destruction of Jerusalem in 2:2, and the king intervened to address his concern. So we are to cast our cares on the Lord, knowing that he cares for us (1 Pet 5:7). There is a time

for prayer and supplication. But there is also a time for joyful adoration and rejoicing in the Lord's goodness. In such seasons, we should set aside our selfish preoccupation with our own problems, and instead focus our attention on the Lord's gracious care for us.

18 day by day ... he read in the book of the law of God.--This was not part of the ordinary feast of Tabernacles, but it was to be done once every seven years, at the year of release (Deut 31:10-13). As on the first day of the month, this was consistent with their rejoicing: cf. v.12, "to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them." Here is a primary means of their joy: their minds were fixed in the Word of God.

Recap

The Jews who returned from Babylon celebrated the feast of tabernacles. Their example holds three lessons for us:

1. Men should lead their families in seeking out the word of God. They should take advantage of the resources provided by older, more experienced men, but should not assume that the presence of such brothers relieves them of responsibility.
2. We should obey what we find in the Word of God—in detail, corporately as well as individually, with attention to the true meaning of the commandment and not just its outer form.
3. We should "serve the Lord with gladness," consciously devoting our attention to thanksgiving and rejoicing in his presence.

Notes

v.15 they found written ... that they should publish and proclaim

The reference in 15 has puzzled many expositors. The law nowhere says in so many words "that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities."

I suggest that the reference is to the Levitical expression *qr) mqd\$ qd\$*.

But why do they not use the pentateuchal language, and instead use *C \$m(* and *C (br qwl*? The difference appears to be due to a vocabulary shift.

qr) appears 131x in the pentateuch, almost always in the senses "to summon" (as in Lev 23 and Num 28-29) or "to name" ("called his name ..."). Only in three of these cases does the AV translate it "to read." In later books, the sense "to read" comes to dominate. Interestingly, the only instance of *miqra)* that means "reading" rather than "convocation" is Neh 8:8. So by the time of Ezra-Neh, to use the pentateuchal term would have led to misunderstanding.

Conversely, the terms that they do use appear to be more common later.

- *C (br qwl* only appears 6x, of which one is Ex 36:6 and the other five are all in Chron and

Ezr-Neh.

- C *\$m*(only appears 4/60x in the Pentateuch, all in Deut 4 and 30, and in reference to what God does, not to a human action.

Matt 18:20, passive “gathered together”

It would be attractive to conclude from the use of the passive in Matt 18:20 that we are called together by the Lord, just as the Jews were in their convocations. This would be a grammatical abuse. The active of *sunagw* is a transitive verb, meaning “to gather something together.” It cannot be used to mean that people gather themselves. The passive is widely used throughout the Greek Bible simply to describe people who assemble together, without any suggestion of an outside agent. It is true that God gathers his people, but we should not argue this from the passive verb in Matt 18:20.