

Nehemiah 7:23-8:12

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.

Each of these has vital lessons for our life today as an assembly of God's people.

7:73-8:12, Trumpets

Setting: 7:6-73a is a virtual repetition of Ezra 2, a listing of the people who came with Zerubbabel from Babylon to resettle Judah. 73b is not repeated from Ezra 2, and so should be taken as the beginning of ch. 8.

The section illustrates three basic principles involved in the life of an assembly of God's people:

- the need for God's people to assemble periodically (7:73-8:1, "dwelt in their cities ... gathered themselves together"), including the little ones (8:2, 3, "all that could understand")
- a right attitude on the part of the people toward the word of God:
 - a hunger on the part of the people for God's word (8:1, "spake unto Ezra ... to bring the book")
 - an attitude of reverence toward God (8:5, 6, "stood up ... bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord")

- the response of the heart to what they hear (8:9 “the people wept,” 8:12 rejoicing “because they had understood the words”)
- a burden by the leaders to be prepared to satisfy that hunger (8:1, 4, “Ezra the scribe,” cf. Ezra 7:10; 8:7, 8, “caused them to understand”)

The Role of Assembling Together

Notice first *that* they assembled, and then *who* assembled.

7:73b when the seventh month came.--This is the time appointed in Lev 23:23-25 for the holy day of Trumpets.

Leviticus 23:23 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ²⁴ Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. ²⁵ Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.

The trumpets aren't mentioned here explicitly, but apparently they were blown, for the people assembled from their cities into an open plaza before the water gate, the gate on the south-east of the city that led down to the Siloam spring. Last year we learned that the particular trumpet call that Moses specified in Lev 23 was the one used to assemble the tribes and prepare to march (Num 10:5, 6). So when the priests sounded the trumpets, the people gathered out of their cities and came together to hear from the Lord.

Application: Notice the two aspects of the peoples' lives: “in their cities” and “gathered together.” We are not a monastic community, but live each week distributed “in our cities,” where we are light and salt to a dark and decaying world. But we also are not independent of each other. God has appointed times when we need to “come together” to encourage one another and hear from him in our lives.

All the people gathered.--This was not an optional event. When God's people assemble, all of them should assemble, unless they are providentially hindered.

2 men and women, and all that could hear with understanding.--It was not just men who gathered to hear the scriptures, but women as well. Those who “could hear with understanding” would be the children. It was a repeated principle of biblical Judaism that the little ones should participate with their parents when the people gathered.

- When Moses asked Pharaoh to let the people go, he insisted that the little ones accompany them. Pharaoh's refusal to permit this was the reason for ongoing plagues, Exod 10:8-11.
- Exod 12:26 presumes that children are present at the passover, for they are expected to ask, “what mean ye by this service?”
- In the year of Jubilee, at the feast of Tabernacles, when the people gathered to read the Law, God commanded, “Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and

thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law” (Deut 31:12,13).

- In Ezra 10:1, when the people were dealing with the problem of mixed marriages, “there assembled unto [Ezra] out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children.”

These examples go beyond the requirement that fathers teach their children (Deut 4:10; 6:6-7). They presume that the children be with their fathers when the fathers are learning God’s word. It is essential that parents give their children a model for how to relate to the Lord.

The Attitude of the People

The people manifest a three-fold attitude toward the word of God: hunger, respect, and submission. This attitude is a sign that someone truly is a child of God. The natural man does not receive the things of the spirit of God (1 Cor 2:14).

Hunger for the Word

8:1 they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book.--The main event recorded on this celebration of trumpets is reading the law of God. It is interesting that this reading initiated with a request by the people, rather than a command imposed by the priests. Trumpets is not the usual place for a public reading of the law; Tabernacles is, on the sabbatical year (Deut 31:10-13). But the people are hungry. They recognize Ezra’s knowledge of the law of God, and call upon him to read it to them.

Amos had prophesied that the Lord would “send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (8:11). He wrote around 760 BC, and his words may anticipate the situation during and immediately after the captivity.

3 he read therein ... from the morning until midday.--The word “morning” here is literally “light.” He read from first light until noon, which would be about six hours. These people were not impatient for the sermon to be over. During this entire time, “the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.”

How hungry are we for the Word of God? Do we long to understand it and treasure the time we can spend with it? Or do we read it sparingly and grudgingly, because someone has told us we should “have devotions,” and rush on to other things? Never in history has God’s word been so available as it is now. Modern technologies make it much more accessible than it was to Ezra, Nehemiah, and their contemporaries. Do we take advantage of this wonderful gift, or have we become jaded?

Respect for the Word

Their hunger was not just curiosity. Several actions on their part show the reverence in which they held the word of God.

5 Ezra opened the book ... and ... all the people stood up.--To this day, it is a sign of respect to stand in the presence of someone important. Men are supposed to stand when a woman enters the room. Younger people are supposed to stand when an older person enters.

6 Ezra blessed the LORD ... And all the people answered, Amen, Amen.--Ezra's blessing is a thanksgiving for the Scriptures. He acknowledged it, not just as a historical document or a devotional text, but as a gift from God. The people's response, "Amen," means that they agree with what he is saying.

7 The people stood in their place.--The people stood, not just when Ezra opened the scroll, but during the entire reading of the law. As we have seen, this continued for about six hours.

We should show respect for the Word of God. Of course, we do not worship a book—but how we treat the book and its contents shows our attitude toward the one who gave it to us. I'm not ashamed that I am uncomfortable when someone stacks something on top of a Bible, or uses a Bible to press leaves or as a booster seat at the table. We should treasure God's revelation to us.

Response to the Word

The final aspect of the people's attitude toward the law is seen in their response when it is read. Their response at first seems contradictory, but reflects their deep engagement with what they heard.

9 all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.--Paul says that the first effect of "doctrine" is "reproof" (2 Tim 3:16). If we are honest and open to the word of God, it will shine a bright light on our sin, and lead us to repentance. This is God's way of working with us: "godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of," 2 Cor 7:10. These people had not heard the word of God read for a long time. Perhaps some of them had never been exposed to it. They were overwhelmed by how far short they fell of its standards.

12 And all the people went their way ... to make great mirth, because they had understood the words.--The teachers explained to them that "this day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep" (v.9). It was the feast of trumpets, the beginning of a new agricultural cycle, a time to remember God's faithful guidance of them in the past and to look forward to his provision in the future. To those whose hearts are tender to God's word, his chastening is quickly followed by comfort and encouragement. He shows us our sin, not to make us feel bad, but so that we can correct it and enjoy his blessing to a fuller degree.

The Preparation of the Teachers

Complementing the godly attitude of the people toward the word of God is diligence on the part of those who teach them.

Ezra the scribe ... Ezra the priest.--These two titles reflect complementary roles.

- The priest represents people before God, interceding for them, and offering sacrifices on their behalf.

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- The scribe represents God to the people. He is learned in God's revelation, and helps people understand it.

Nehemiah wants us to remember that Ezra has both roles. He is called "the priest" in Ezra 7:11, 12, 21; 10:10, 16; Neh 8:2, 9; 12:26, but "the scribe" in Ezra 7:11, 12; Neh 8:1, 4, 13; 12:26. For the combination, see Ezra's introduction in Ezra 7:1-6, 10.

The relation between these roles is worth considering in more detail.

Recall that the Levites, unlike other tribes of Israel, had no delimited territory. They were scattered among the cities of Israel. One reason for this was that they had a distributed teaching function (Lev 10:11; 2 Chr 17:7-9; Mal 2:7). It was God's purpose that they should operate in both directions. But sometimes this didn't happen.

- A priest is a priest by birth, because he is descended from Aaron.
- He is a scribe by diligent effort and study, and if he does not address this responsibility, can easily fail in it.

Unfortunately, there were often times when the priests did fail in their teaching responsibilities.

- During the time of Asa (913-872 BC), 2 Chr 15:3 records that "for a long season Israel hath been without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law."
- Ezekiel prophesied during the captivity that "the law shall perish from the priest" (7:26)
- Isaiah explained one cause of this: the people often encouraged those who taught them to distort the truth. "This is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD: 10 Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits: 11 Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us" (30:9-11).

Ezra was resolved not to fall into this trap. When he is first introduced, we learn (Ezra 7:10)

Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

Two practical lessons.

- We are priests by the new birth, but to have a knowledge of the word of God requires study and application. We should have the ambition that Ezra showed in 7:10.
- By the time of the NT, the two functions of priest and scribe had diverged, just as in our day the functions of elder and teacher have diverged. But one cannot be a capable leader of God's people without knowing the Word of God. If you "desire the office of a bishop" (1 Tim 3:1), you should devote yourself to knowing the scriptures.

7 Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, ...--Ezra was not the only one involved in this process. Others participated as well. In spite of his unique gifts and diligence, he seeks to avoid the appearance of a “one-man ministry.” One group of men stand with him on the platform as he reads, while others are involved in the explanation.

Caused the people to understand the law.--This is a poignant statement of the teacher’s responsibility. It is to cause people to understand. If they don’t understand, it’s the teacher’s fault. Teaching is not just a matter of understanding the text yourself and then expressing it to others. The teacher must take responsibility for communicating the truth to his hearers.

v.8 summarizes the activities of the morning. First, it states what Ezra and his colleagues do, then what the people do.

they read in the book in the law of God.--First, they read the actual text of Scripture. Sometimes Christians converse about the Bible without opening it and reading the text itself. It’s wonderful to be able to recall verses from memory, but jumping from one text to another is a good way to miss the real intent. It is important to spend time reading the actual text. Paul exhorted Timothy to “give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Tim 4:13), and the first thing was “reading.”

Two oblique verb forms follow that tell what accompanied the reading: “distinctly” and “gave the sense.”

Distinctly.--This is a participle, and refers to distinguishing things. Probably, it means to go section by section through the text. We know from v.7 that there was explanation with the reading. This was not done all at the end, but section by section, as the text was read.

Gave the sense.--They explained what the text meant.

they ... caused them to understand the reading.--This is a possible translation of the word, but everywhere else that this form occurs in the OT, it means “understand,” not “cause to understand.” Probably, Nehemiah is emphasizing to us that as a result of the diligence of Ezra and the Levites, the people did in fact understand what was read to them.

Summary

This ancient convocation is a good example for us today.

- We need both to “live in our cities” and to “assemble together.”
- We should cultivate a hungry, respectful, responsible attitude toward the Word of God.
- Those who teach must be diligent in their preparation and must take responsibility that their hearers understand.