

CHAPTER 8

Ezra came up out of Babylon thirteen years before Nehemiah came, yet we have here a piece of good work which he did, that might have been done before, but was not done till Nehemiah came, who, though he was not such a scholar nor such a divine as Ezra, nor such a scribe in the law of his God, yet was a man of a more lively active spirit. His zeal set Ezra's learning on work, and then great things were done, as we find here, where we have,

I. The public and solemn reading and expounding of the law (v. 1-8).

II. The joy which the people were ordered to express upon that occasion (v. 9-12).

III. The solemn keeping of the feast of tabernacles according to the law (v. 13-18).

NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

THE EXPLANATION OF THE LAW

We have here an account of a solemn religious assembly, and the good work that was done in that assembly, to the honour of God and the edification of the church.

I. The time of it was the *first day of the seventh month*, v. 2. That was the day of the *feast of trumpets*, which is called a *sabbath*, and on which they were to have a *holy convocation*, ⁽⁻⁰²²⁴⁾Leviticus 23:24; ⁽⁻⁰²³¹⁾Numbers 29:1. But that was not all: it was one that day that the altar was set up, and they began to offer their burnt-offerings after their return out of captivity, a recent mercy in the memory of many then living; in a thankful remembrance of that, it is likely, they had kept this feast ever since with more than ordinary solemnity. Divine favours which are fresh in mind, and which we ourselves have been witnesses of, should be, and usually are, most affecting.

II. The place was in the *street that was before the water-gate* (v. 1), a spacious broad street, able to contain so great a multitude, which the court of the temple was not; for probably it was not now built nearly so large as it had been in Solomon's time. Sacrifices were to be offered only at the door of the temple, but praying, and praising, and preaching, were, and are, services of religion as acceptably performed in one place as in another. When this congregation thus met in the street of the city no doubt God was with them.

III. The persons that met were all the people, who were not compelled to come, but voluntarily gathered themselves together by common agreement, as one man: not only men came, but women and children, even as many as were capable of understanding what they heard. Masters of families should bring their families with them to the public worship of God. Women and children have souls to save, and are therefore concerned to acquaint themselves with the word of God and attend on the means of knowledge and grace. Little ones, as they come to the exercise of reason, must be trained up in the exercises of religion.

IV. The master of this assembly was Ezra the priest; he presided in this service. None so fit to expound and preach as he who was such a ready scribe in the law of his God.

1. His call to the service was very clear; for being in office as a priest, and qualified as a scribe, the *people spoke to him to bring the book of the law* and read it to them, v. 1. God gave him ability and authority, and then the people gave him opportunity and invitation. Knowledge is spiritual alms, which those that are able should give to every one that needs, to every one that asks.

2. His post was very convenient. He stood in a pulpit or tower of wood, *which they made for the word* (so it is in the original), *for the preaching of the word*, that what he said might be the more gracefully delivered and the better heard, and that the eyes of the hearers might be upon him, which would engage their attention, as ~~☞~~ Luke 4:20.

3. He had several assistants. Some of these stood with him (v. 4), six on his right hand and seven on his left: either his pulpit was so contrived as to hold them all in a row, as in a gallery (but then it would scarcely have been called a *tower*), or they had desks a degree lower. Some think, that he appointed them to read when he was weary; at least his taking them as

assessors with him put an honour upon them before the people, in order to their being employed in the same service another time. Others who are mentioned (v. 7) seem to have been employed at the same time in other places near at hand, to read and expound to those who could not come within hearing of Ezra. Of these also there were thirteen priests, whose lips were to keep knowledge, ^{<3017>}Malachi 2:7. It is a great mercy to a people thus to be furnished with ministers that are apt to teach. Happy was Ezra in having such assistants as these, and happy were they in having such a guide as Ezra.

V. The religious exercises performed in this assembly were not ceremonial, but moral, praying and preaching. Ezra, as president of the assembly, was,

1. The people's mouth to God, and they affectionately joined with him, v. 6. He blessed the Lord as the great God, gave honour to him by praising his perfections and praying for his favour; and the people, in token of their concurrence with him both in prayers and praises, said, *Amen, Amen, lifted up their hands* in token of their desire being towards God and all their expectations from him, and *bowed their heads* in token of their reverence of him and subjection to him. Thus must we adore God, and address ourselves to him, when we are going to read and hear the word of God, as those that see God in his word very great and very good.

2. God's mouth to the people, and they attentively hearkened to him. This was the chief business of the solemnity, and observe,

(1.) *Ezra brought the law before the congregation*, v. 2. He had taken care to provide himself with the best and most correct copies of the law; and what he had laid up for his own use and satisfaction he here brought forth, as a good householder out of his treasury, for the benefit of the church. Observe,

[1.] The book of the law is not to be confined to the scribes' studies, but to be brought before the congregation and read to them in their own language.

[2.] Ministers, when they go to the pulpit, should take their Bibles with them; Ezra did so; thence they must fetch their knowledge, and according to that rule they must speak and must show that they do so. See ^{<4170>}2 Chronicles 17:9.

(2.) He opened the book with great reverence and solemnity, *in the sight of all the people*, v. 5. He brought it forth with a sense of the great mercy of God to them in giving them that book; he opened it with a sense of his mercy to them in giving them leave to read it, that it was not a spring shut up and a fountain sealed. The *taking of the books, and the opening of the seals*, we find celebrated with joy and praise, ^{<418>}Revelation 5:9. Let us learn to address ourselves to the services of religion with solemn stops and pauses, and not to go about them rashly; let us consider what we are doing when we take God's book into our hands, and open it, and so also when we bow our knees in prayer; and what we do let us do deliberately, ^{<418>}Ecclesiastes 5:1.

(3.) He and others read in the book of the law, *from morning till noon* (v. 3), and they read *distinctly*, v. 8. Reading the scriptures in religious assemblies is an ordinance of God, whereby he is honoured and his church edified. And, upon special occasions, we must be willing to attend for many hours together on the reading and expounding of the word of God: those mentioned here were thus employed for six hours. Let those that read and preach the word learn also to deliver themselves distinctly, as those who understand what they say and are affected with it themselves, and who desire that those they speak to may understand it, retain it, and be affected with it likewise. *It is a snare for a man to devour that which is holy.*

(4.) What they read they expounded, showed the intent and meaning of it, and what use was to be made of it; they gave the sense in other words, that they might *cause the people to understand the reading*, v. 7, 8. Note,

[1.] It is requisite that those who hear the word should understand it, else it is to them but an empty sound of words, ^{<418>}Matthew 24:15.

[2.] It is therefore required of those who are teachers by office that they explain the word and give the sense of it. *Understandest thou what thou readest?* and, *Have you understood all these things?* are good questions to be put to the hearers; but, *How should we except someone guide us?* is as proper a question for them to put to their teachers, ^{<418>}Acts 8:30, 31. Reading is good, and preaching good, but expounding brings the reading and the preaching together, and thus makes the reading the more intelligible and the preaching the more convincing.

(5.) The people conducted themselves very properly when the word was read and opened to them.

[1.] With great reverence. When Ezra opened the book *all the people stood up* (v. 5), thereby showing respect both to Ezra and to the word he was about to read. It becomes servants to stand when their master speaks to them, in honour to their master and to show a readiness to do as they are bidden.

[2.] With great fixedness and composedness. They *stood in their place* (v. 7); several ministers were reading and expounding at some distance from each other, and every one of the people kept his post, did not go to hear first one and then another, to make remarks upon them, but stood in his place, that he might neither give disturbance to another nor receive any disturbance himself.

[3.] With great attention and a close application of mind: *The ears of all the people were unto the book of the law* (v. 3), were even chained to it; they heard readily, and minded every word. The word of God commands attention and deserves it. If through carelessness we let much slip in hearing, there is danger that through forgetfulness we shall let all slip after hearing.

<K&B> NEHEMIAH 8:9-12

THE EXPLANATION OF THE LAW

We may here observe,

I. How the people were wounded with the words of the law that were read to them. The law works death, and speaks terror, shows men their sins, and their misery and danger because of sin, and thunders a curse against every one that continues not in every part of his duty. Therefore when they heard it they *all wept* (v. 9): it was a good sign that their hearts were tender, like Josiah's when he heard the words of the law. They wept to think how they had offended God, and exposed themselves, by their many violations of the law; when some wept all wept, for they all saw themselves guilty before God.

II. How they were healed and comforted with the words of peace that were spoken to them. It was well that they were so much affected with the word of God, and received the impressions of it; but they must not yield unduly to their mourning, especially at this time, because the day was holy to the Lord; it was one of the solemn feasts, on which it was their duty to rejoice; and even sorrow for sin must not hinder our joy in God, but rather lead us to it and prepare us for it.

1. The masters of the assembly endeavoured to pacify them and encourage them. Now Nehemiah is brought in, and not before, in this chapter; he took notice of the people's weeping. Ezra was pleased to see them so affected with the word, but Nehemiah observed to him, and Ezra concurred in the thought, that it was now unseasonable. This day was holy (it is called *a sabbath*, ^{<1823>}Leviticus 23:24), and therefore was to be celebrated with joy and praise, not as if it were *a day to afflict their souls*.

(1.) They forbade the people to *mourn and weep* (v. 9): *Be not sorry* (v. 10); *hold your peace, neither be you grieved*, v. 11. Every thing is beautiful in its season; as we must not be merry when *God calls to mourning*, so we must not frighten and afflict ourselves when God gives us occasion to rejoice. Even sorrow for sin must not grow so excessive as to hinder our joy in God and our cheerfulness in his service.

(2.) They commanded them to testify their joy, to put *on the garments of praise instead of the spirit of heaviness*. They allowed them, in token of their joy, to feast themselves, to eat and drink better than on other days, *to eat the fat and drink the sweet*; but then it must be,

[1.] With charity to the poor: “*Send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared that your abundance may supply their want, that they may rejoice with you and their loins may bless you.*” Christ directs those that make feasts to invite their poor neighbours, ^{<2143>}Luke 14:13. But it is especially the duty of a religious feast, as well as of a religious fast, to *draw out the soul to the hungry*, ^{<2881>}Isaiah 58:7, 10. God's bounty should make us bountiful. Many will eat the fat and drink the sweet themselves, even to excess, that will never allow portions, nor scarcely crumbs, to the poor, who may read their own doom in the parable of the rich man, ^{<2169>}Luke 16:19, etc. But such know not, or consider not, what God gave them their estates for. Observe, We must not only give to those that offer themselves,

but send to those that are out of sight. *The liberal devises liberal things,* and seeks objects of charity.

[2.] It must be with piety and devotion: *The joy of the Lord is your strength.* Let it not be a carnal sensual joy, but holy and spiritual, the *joy of the Lord*, joy in the goodness of God, under the direction and government of the grace of God, joy arising from our interest in the love and favour of God and the tokens of his favour. “This joy will be your strength, therefore encourage it; it will be your strength, *First*, For the performance of the other duties of the feast.” The more cheerful we are in our religious exercises the more we shall abound in them. *Secondly*, “For all that which you have to do in conformity to the law of God which has been read to you.” Holy joy will be oil to the wheels of our obedience. *Thirdly*, “For the resisting of your enemies that are plotting against you.” The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies, and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.

2. The assembly complied with the directions that were given them. Their weeping was *stilled* (v. 11) and they *made great mirth*, v. 12. Note, We ought always to have such a command of every passion as that, however it may break out, it may soon be restrained and called in again when we are convinced that it is either unreasonable or unseasonable. *He that has such a rule as this over his own spirit is better than the mighty.* Observe,

(1.) After they had wept they rejoiced. Holy mourning makes way for holy mirth; those that *sow in tears shall reap in joy*; those that tremble at the convictions of the word may triumph in the consolations of it.

(2.) The ground of their joy was very good. They made mirth, not because they had the fat to eat and the sweet to drink, and a great deal of good company, but because they had *understood the words that were declared to them.* note,

[1.] To have the holy scriptures with us, and helps to understand them, is a very great mercy, which we have abundant reason to rejoice in. Bibles and ministers are the joy of God's Israel.

[2.] The better we understand the word of God the more comfort we shall find in it; for the darkness of trouble arises from the darkness of ignorance and mistake. When the words were first declared to them they wept; but,

when they understood them, they rejoiced, finding at length precious promises made to those who repented and reformed and that therefore there was hope in Israel.

<1483> NEHEMIAH 8:13-18

THE JOY OF THE PEOPLE

We have here,

I. The people's renewed attendance upon the word. They had spent the greatest part of one day in praying and hearing, and yet were so far from being weary of that new moon and sabbath that the next day after, though it was no festival, the chief of them came together again to hear Ezra expound (v. 13), which they found more delightful and gainful than any worldly pleasure or profit whatsoever. Note, The more we converse with the word of God, if we rightly understand it and be affected with it, the more we shall covet to converse with it, and to increase in our acquaintance with it, saying, *How sweet are thy words unto my mouth!* Those that understand the scriptures well will still be desirous to understand them better. Now the priests and the Levites themselves came with *the chief of the people to Ezra*, that prince of expositors, *to understand the words of the law*, or, as it is in the margin, *that they might instruct in the words of the law*; they came to be taught themselves, that they might be qualified to teach others. Observe,

1. Though, on the first day, Ezra's humility had set them *on his right hand and on his left, as teachers with him* (v. 4, 7), yet now, they being by trial made more sensible than ever of their own deficiencies and his excellencies, on the second day their humility set them at Ezra's feet, as learners of him.

2. Those that would teach others must themselves receive instructions. Priests and Levites must be taught first and then teach.

II. The people's ready obedience to the word, in one particular instance, as soon as they were made sensible of their duty therein. It is probable that Ezra, *after the wisdom of his God that was in his hand* (<15072> Ezra 7:25), when they applied to him for instruction out of the law on the second day of the seventh month, read to them those laws which concerned the feasts

of that month, and, among the rest, that of the feast of tabernacles, ^{<R234>}Leviticus 23:34; ^{<S1613>}Deuteronomy 16:13. Ministers should preach not only that which is true and good, but that which is seasonable, directing to the *work of the day in its day*. Here is, 1. The divine appointment of the feast of tabernacles reviewed, v. 14, 14. *They found written in the law* a commandment concerning it. Those that diligently search the scriptures will find those things written there which they had forgotten or not duly considered. This feast of tabernacles was a memorial of their dwelling in tents in the wilderness, a representation of our tabernacle state in this world, and a type of the holy joy of the gospel church. The conversion of the nations to the faith of Christ is foretold under the figure of this feast (^{<S3446>}Zechariah 14:16); they shall come to *keep the feast of tabernacles*, as having here no continuing city. This feast was to be proclaimed in all their cities. The people were themselves to fetch boughs of trees (they of Jerusalem fetched them from the mount of Olives) and to make booths, or arbours, of them, in which they were to lodge (as much as the weather would permit) and to make merry during the feast.

2. This appointment religiously observed, v. 16, 17. Then we read and hear the word acceptably and profitably when we do according to what is written therein, when what appears to be our duty is revived after it has been neglected.

(1.) They observed the ceremony: *They sat in booths*, which the priests and Levites set up in the courts of the temple; those that had houses of their own set up booths on the roofs of them, or in their courts; and those that had not such conveniences set them up in the streets. This feast had usually been observed (^{<R4R8>}2 Chronicles 5:3; ^{<S5R04>}Ezra 3:4), but never with such solemnity as now since Joshua's time, when they were newly settled, as they were now newly re-settled in Canaan. That man loves his house too well that cannot find in his heart to quit it, awhile, in compliance either with an ordinance or with a providence of God.

(2.) They minded the substance, else the ceremony, how significant soever, would have been insignificant.

[1.] They did it with gladness, with *very great gladness*, rejoicing in God and his goodness to them. All their holy feasts, but this especially, were to be celebrated with joy, which would be much for the honour of God, and their own encouragement in his service.

[2.] They attended the reading and expounding of the word of God during all the days of the feast, v. 18. They improved their leisure for this good work. Spare hours cannot be better spent than in studying the scriptures and conversing with them. At this feast of tabernacles God appointed the law to be read once in seven years. Whether this was that year of release in which that service was to be performed (^{<6310>}Deuteronomy 31:10, 11) does not appear; however they spent all the days of the feast in that good work, and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, as God had appointed, in which they finished the solemnity the twenty-second day of the month, yet did not separate, for the twenty-fourth day was appointed to be spent in fasting and prayer. Holy joy just not indispose us for godly sorrow any more than godly sorrow for holy joy.