

NEHEMIAH 8

Although our last study was in chapter 6 we are going to skip on in our House Group studies to chapter 8, as chapter 7 may not work well in a House Group discussion setting. At the end of chapter 6 the wall is completed (6:15). There is the report of a fifth column within the people of God, as the nobles are communicating with Tobiah (6:17-19 – we will come back to this later in the book). Then in chapter 7 Nehemiah makes the walls secure by placing men of integrity in charge of guarding them (7:1-3).

There is then a list of all those who had been the first to return to Jerusalem (7:4-73). This is quite an odd part of the book, as the list is out of date at this point in the story (Nehemiah has found it – 7:5, those who moved into Jerusalem at the time of Nehemiah once the walls are rebuilt are listed in chapter 11). However this list is important because it shows firstly, who is a true Jew and particularly, who was of priestly descent (so could therefore serve in the temple). It is a turning point in the book, as it shows that the re-building of the walls was not an end in itself – the real issue was the re-building of the people of God into a people who were sure of who they were, and who followed God obediently.

Chapter 8 is a very significant chapter as we begin to see the people of God being rebuilt.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Remind yourself of Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1. Why has the exile and destruction of Jerusalem come about?

Because of the people's wickedness and disobedience to God's commands (verse 5, 7). Therefore if Israel are to be secure in Jerusalem they don't just need their walls rebuilt, but they need to be obedient to God's word.

Who takes part in this chapter (verse 1)? Why is that significant?

All the people. This is not a chapter about individuals responding to God's word – it is the people of God as the people of God responding.

What do Ezra and the scribes do?

Read God's word aloud (verse 3), praised the LORD (verse 6 – don't miss this stage!), they gave the meaning (verse 8 – could involve both translating it, and what we would think of as preaching).

Why are all these stages vital? What happens if any of these stages are missing?

- Reading (and preaching) **without** making it clear so people can understand?

No one learns anything. Leads to frustration.

- Reading and clarity **without** praise for God?

Services feel dry and sterile. Nothing more than lectures, not worship. The preacher must be praising!

- Praise for God **without** serious reading and teaching of God's word?

No content for the praise. In the long term there will be no depth or growth.

What should we expect from, and pray for, those responsible for the public proclamation of God's word in our church?

That they will be men who read, preach and praise well – in that way they serve us all.

How do the people respond?

They are very attentive (verse 3). This went on for a long time! (Daybreak until noon). – Shows the hunger these people have for the word of God. They worshipped (verse 6). They wept (verse 9) – the seriousness of what they heard affected them, and they realised their sin.

Why do they respond like that? Do we? If not – why might that be?

They have a genuine desire for God's word, and a realisation of how serious and true it is. How can we prepare ourselves to hear God's word on Sundays?

What is the command in verse 9-11? Does it seem odd to you?

They are told not to weep, but to obey God's word and keep the festival, which they have discovered falls on this day.

Why do you think they are commanded to do this? What might this command say about:

- What they'd heard?

God's word commands them to keep a festival on this day and to be joyful, so they must obey it! It would be odd to mourn for your disobedience, if you were not prepared to obey now.

- Who they were?

Although they were sinners and needed to repent (as we'll see in the next chapter), they were still God's people, he was still their LORD and he was in a covenant relationship with them. There was joy and security there.

- The character of God?

He saves. He deals with sin. He is our strength. Not our tears.

In verses 13-18 we get a description of the people keeping the feast of tabernacles, and we are told in verse 17 "their joy was very great". What was the source of their joy? Was it just the fun of good party? (see verse 10)

There joy was to be "in the Lord". They were to know who God is, and to understand and appreciate the depths of the covenant relationship they have with him (LORD in capital letters refers to the covenant name for God, reminding them that he has committed to be their God, and has taken them to be his people).

The feast of tabernacles which they keep can be read described in Leviticus 23:39-43. It was a yearly reminder and celebration of the fact that the LORD brought them out of Egypt and kept them safe in the wilderness as they travelled to the promised land. The "joy" commanded was the joy of their salvation.

Can joy be commanded, and produced as an act of obedience? How? How is this joy different to feelings of happiness and pleasure?

Clearly joy can be commanded, because it is! God calls us to recognise who he is, hold on to him, find our security and hope in him. the more we do that the more joy we will have. This is not about passing emotions (which come and go dependent on our circumstances) but knowledge of deep realities.

“The dominant note of the Christian life is not weeping for sin, but joy for our salvation”. Do you agree? Why or why not? What consequences should that have for our church services and Christian lives?

There is a place for sorrow over sin, and tears of repentance (perhaps more than we have in our church culture). However we must remember that we are saved people, and that God has dealt with our sin. Joy should be evident in our lives, corporately and personally – joy in the Lord, which is different to feelings of happiness.