

Nehemiah 8
Psalm 42B
John 7

“Holiness and the Joy of the LORD”

March 17, 2019

Did you notice the emphasis placed on the “Water Gate”?

The Water Gate is mentioned three times in the chapter –

verse 1 – “the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate”

verse 3 – “And he read from the Law facing the square before the Water Gate”

verse 16 – “they made booths...in the square at the Water Gate.”

Why do they meet at the Water Gate?

Oh, sure, there are practical reasons:

the Water Gate is one of the gates near the temple –

and it may well have been the one with the largest square,

so they could fit the most people.

Maybe the acoustics were better there!

But there are several other gates that could have worked.

Why the Water Gate?

“The image of the Water Gate can recall Ezekiel’s prophetic vision
regarding the fulfillment of the temple (Ezek 40-48).

The people are hungry for eternal food;

they seek medicine unto eternal life

and a bathing that purifies from sins.” (Levering 173-174)

In Ezekiel’s vision, he saw a trickle of water
flowing from the temple out toward the nations,
and as the stream flowed, it grew deeper and wider
until it was a great river that no one could swim across.

Ezekiel’s vision was rooted in the rivers of paradise.

In Genesis 2:9-10 we are told that the tree of life was in the midst of the garden,
and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden,
and there it divided and became four rivers.

The temple had been designed as a picture of Eden –
with cherubim still guarding the way back into the Most Holy Place.
And outside the temple there was a great basin of water called “the sea.”
And Solomon had built ten “water chariots” that spread out from sea,
as reminders of how the living water of the temple
was to flow out to the nations.

So when Ezekiel saw a vision of a trickle of water issuing from the temple –
on the east side – flowing out of the gate that faces toward the east –
Ezekiel would have recognized that the living water from the temple
is now flowing out to the nations!

The water chariots are on the move!

And now, 150 years after Ezekiel's vision, Ezra gathers the people at the Water Gate –
on the east side of Jerusalem, near the temple.

Beginning at Jerusalem, the water of life will begin to flow!

Are you getting thirsty?

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 42B in your TPH.
As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God!

The first part of the song starts with longing for water –
remembering the glad multitude keeping festival
at the house of God – singing praise to God.

The second part wanders up the Jordan to Mt. Hermon –
and the waterfalls of northern Israel.

Now there is *too much water* –
and I am being drowned in God's breakers and waves,
as my enemies taunt me and mock me.

But both parts come back to the same refrain:

"Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

TPH 42B
John 7:1-39

Do you see what Jesus is saying here?

Jesus *is* the temple – the rivers of living water flow from *his* heart
to all those who believe in him.

In Genesis 2, the river that flowed from the Garden divided into four
and spread through all the world.

In Ezekiel 47, the trickle from the temple flowed out into the Dead Sea,
and turned the Salt Sea into fresh water!

Now, Jesus does this at the Feast of Booths.

The Feast of Booths is the same feast that Nehemiah and Ezra had kept.
The purpose of the Feast of Booths

was to remember how God had provided for them in the wilderness –
for forty years.

And by the time of Christ, on the last day of the Feast
it had become a tradition to celebrate how God had provided water from the rock.
So when Jesus says “If anyone thirsts” –
he is playing on the “theme of the day” –
and reminding the people of the whole story of living water in the OT.

We need to see one more thing from John:

In John chapter 19, verses 33-35, John tells us that after Jesus died on the cross,
the soldiers did not break his legs,
“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear,
and at once there came out blood and water.”

Why does it say “blood and water”?

Many have provided all sorts of interesting medical reasons –
but the gospel writers were not giving us medical curiosities!
John does not say ‘blood and water’
in order to provide information for an autopsy of Jesus!
No, John has already told us in chapter 7
that living water would flow from the heart of Jesus to his people.
And here – at the cross – John sees the proof!

Ezekiel’s river of living water that began as a trickle from under the altar –
flowing through Nehemiah’s Water Gate –

*that river of living water flows from the heart of Jesus – the true temple –
from Jesus’ heart to you.*

And *that* is the heart of Nehemiah chapter 8!

Because Nehemiah 8 starts on the first day of the seventh month.

1. The First Day of the Seventh Month: Reading the Law (v1-12)

a. Living Water at the Water Gate: Ezra and the Law of Moses (v1-6)

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.

If you know anything about the Jewish calendar,
you probably know something about the Passover –
the feast celebrating the Exodus from Egypt –
which took place in the *first* month.

While Passover is important,
the Jewish calendar is *more* centered on the *seventh month*.
There are three *special dates* in the seventh month.

The first day of the seventh month was supposed to be the Feast of Trumpets –
when the priests would blow the trumpets
announcing the coming of the 7th month –
the coming of the great feast!
The tenth day of the seventh month was the Day of Atonement –
the one day of the whole year when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies
and make atonement for the sins of Israel.
And then from the 15th to the 23rd of the seventh month
was the Feast of Booths – or Tabernacles.

So what we see in verse 2 is that the people assembled on the 1st day of the 7th month.
This was supposed to be the Feast of Trumpets.
There is no reference to the blowing of trumpets,
but since the blowing of trumpets was used to *assemble* the people,
the fact that there is a great assembly communicates the same point!

We heard from Nehemiah at the beginning of chapter 7, verse 5,
that “my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people”

But at the end of chapter 7, we heard that “the people of Israel were in their towns.”
The wall of Jerusalem has been rebuilt.
The city of God has been restored!

But the *people* of God?
Without a holy people, there will be no holy city!

And so Nehemiah assembles the people –
or, better, “all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate.”
It’s *not* just “Nehemiah’s” work!
Nehemiah didn’t have to send his servants out into the villages to round up the strays!
(I’m reminded of one medieval priest who, if he noticed that attendance was down,
would order that Psalm 119 be sung,
and then he took a horse whip and made a round of all the village public houses
to drive the strays to church!)

Nehemiah doesn’t do that!
The people are eager to hear the Word of the LORD!

They gather at the Water Gate to hear the streams of living water that flow from God's Law.

And they called on Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses.

Some think that this refers to the book of Deuteronomy –

but more likely it refers to the whole Pentateuch.

(We'll see in a few minutes that some of what they found in the book of Law

comes from Leviticus – so they had to read from that as well!)

It would take 7-8 hours to read the whole Pentateuch –

so they may not have read everything in one day

(verse 3 says that he read *from it* – which may indicate a partial reading –

from early morning until midday).

³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Notice that the whole thing was well-planned.

They had built a wooden platform so that Ezra's voice could carry over the crowd –

and so that everyone could see him – and the Book of the Law.

We don't have lots of detail here,

but we can see parts of the liturgical actions and responses.

When you have a crowd of thousands,

you are not going to be able to explain – "okay, when I say this,

then everyone needs to say that – or do this."

So what we are seeing here are the *regular* liturgical practices of Ezra's day.

When Ezra opens the book of the Law, everyone stands up.

When Ezra blesses the LORD, all the people answered, "Amen. Amen,"

and lifted up their hands.

And then they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves with their faces to the ground.

And then Ezra spent the next several hours reading from the book of the Law.

b. The Levites and the Explanation/Translation of the Law (v7-8)

⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah,

Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,^[a] helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,^[b] and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

In verses 7-8, we hear that several of the Levites were involved
in helping people understand the Law.

“They read from the book, from the Law of God, *clearly*” –
this word translated “clearly” could either mean “distinctly” (or “clearly”) –
or it could mean “separately” (as the ESV footnote points out “paragraph by paragraph”).

There are two options for what is going on:

One is that they are going through the Law section by section,
briefly explaining the meaning as they go.

The other possibility is that most Jews don’t really understand Hebrew anymore.

Aramaic was the main language in the region,
and so many Jews would not have learned Hebrew very well.
The languages are similar, but it may have required “translation”
for the people to understand the “sense” of the Law.

Either way, these Levites are doing the work of *preachers* –
proclaiming the Word of the LORD,
explaining what we are to believe concerning God,
and what duty God requires of us.

Think about what has happened.

Ezra has been in Jerusalem for around 15 years.

He has set himself to study, to do, and to teach the Law of God.

Now, 15 years later, he has 13 fellow priests on board with him in the pulpit,
and there are 13 Levites
who are competent to expound the scriptures to the people!

But you can see the importance of preaching here.

Reading the Bible is essential to Christian worship –
but the reading of the Word must always be accompanied by *preaching* the Word.
As the Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip in Acts 8,
“How can I understand what I am reading unless someone guides me.”

Jesus taught us that all the scripture speaks of him –
and beginning from Moses and all the Prophets he began to explain
all the things in the scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

c. “This Day Is Holy to the LORD”: the Joy of True Holiness (v9-12)

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who

taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.

The people wept as they heard the words of the Law –
because they recognized how *far short* they had fallen of God’s standard!
And there is a proper time to weep – to grieve over our sin!
But this is not that time!

I’m reminded of one of Augustine’s sermons.

In his day, whenever the preacher mentioned “sin”,
it was common for people to beat their breasts as a token of their repentance.
One Sunday, Augustine paused in the middle of his sermon and said,
I can tell that you are not really paying attention!
When you heard the word “sin” you beat your breasts –
but you missed the point!
I had said that your *sins* are forgiven!
You should not beat your breast for that!
You should rejoice!

In the same way, the reading of the Book of the Law – on this day –
was not intended to focus on how Israel had fallen short –
but on how God had been merciful in bringing a people near to himself!
“For the first time since the days of the Davidic kings, Jerusalem –
and not only the temple –
stands as a place where the people of Israel dwell with their God.” (Levering, 179)

Verses 10-12 then describe the day as a feast day:

¹⁰ *Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”* ¹¹ *So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.”* ¹² *And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*

On a feast day, in the OT, the peace offering would be sacrificed –
and all of the worshipers would partake of the peace offering
(eat the fat and drink sweet wine) –
but also, Deuteronomy had made it clear that when you came to the Feast,
you should always make sure to take care of the Levites, the poor,
and the sojourners –
“anyone who has nothing ready.”

Why is it required that you send portions to those who have nothing ready?
“for this day is holy to our Lord.”

We saw a couple weeks ago that charity is *not* optional!
Caring for those in need is not a matter of personal choice.
(Sure, in one sense it is –
You can always choose to rebel against God and reject his Word!)
But for the Christian – for the holy people of God –
charity – love for those who are helpless –
is at the very heart of what *holiness* is all about!

Why do I say that?
“for this day is holy to our Lord.”
It is set apart to him.

And what is the holiness of God all about?!
We often think of the holiness of God as his being high and lifted up
and separate from sinners.
And it is.

(Think of Isaiah’s vision in the temple –
“Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God Almighty” –
as the glory of the LORD filled their temple!)
But what was the purpose of Isaiah’s vision in the temple?
To send a prophet to preach to the people!
To give a message of *judgment* – yes,
but also a message of salvation,
when God would restore the holy stump! (Isaiah 6)

God’s holiness is not just that which makes high and distant and exalted!
God’s holiness is *also* what prompts him to *draw near* to us,
and draw us *near* to him –
so that we might share in his holiness!!
If God’s holiness was *only* that which makes him distant –
then we could *never* share in his holiness!!

And so, if this day is holy –
then *you* need to draw others into that fellowship.
And the person who comes to church without anything –
without family or friends or a place to call home –
that person is the one that you should draw in to your circle!

We need to be careful!
We are so good at ‘being in each other’s lives’ –

that we can very easily get comfortable at just hanging out with each other!

But Nehemiah says that we should include those who have nothing.
That is *true* hospitality!

True holiness is expressed in true hospitality.

And then in verses 13-16 we also see how true holiness
is expressed in *studying* the words of the LORD:

2. The Second Day of the Seventh Month: Studying the Law (v13-16)

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.

They had *heard* the words of the Law on the first day of the month –
but now they are interested in studying them more carefully.

We need to *know* the Word of God.

Now, notice that the Word of God was read and preached to *everyone* who could understand
(verses 2 and 3).

But a more careful and thorough study of the scriptures
is required of the heads of fathers' houses with the priests and the Levites.

This is part of why we have “officer training classes” –
so that those who lead the church can be better trained in the scriptures.

Those who are supposed to lead others
must themselves study so that they can know what the Bible says!

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^[c] 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.”

This makes it clear that they read more than just Deuteronomy.

Because Deuteronomy says nothing about dwelling in booths – or bringing leafy branches
That comes from Leviticus 23.

And when the people hear what God requires (verse 16):

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.

All around the city – and particularly in the areas closest to the temple –
the people made booths for themselves out of branches.

They begin to *do* what God required!

The holy city is beginning to be filled by a holy people!
The river of living water is beginning to flow!

3. The Feast of the Seventh Month: Doing the Law (v17-18)

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.*

Verse 17 tells us that from the days of Joshua to the days of Nehemiah,
the people of Israel had not actually made booths and lived in them for the Feast.

1 Kings 8 tells us that King Solomon dedicated the Temple at the Feast of Booths –
and in this very book, in Ezra 3, we are told that Zerubbabel kept the Feast of Booths –
so we know that Israel had at least *occasionally* kept the Feast of Booths.
But they hadn't done all that Leviticus 23 had said.
They hadn't made Booths and lived in them for a week!

And verse 18 tells us that day by day, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God.
Deuteronomy 31 had said that the priests and elders of Israel
were to read the Law publicly at the Feast of Booths every seven years.
Apparently this hadn't really been happening...

And so *this year* they made booths and lived in the booths for seven days –
this year they listened daily to the reading of the Book of the Law of God.

They finally *did* what God said!

You see, when you start with rejoicing over your salvation –
you end with obedient faithfulness!

There's a proper time for grieving over our sins (we'll see that next week!) –
but first, there is a proper time for "very great rejoicing" –
because God has brought us to himself!

They devoted themselves to Ezra's reading of the Law for seven days – day by day –
and then on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly.

"If the seven days signal a new creation, the eighth day begins the history of Israel anew, freed from the weight of past sins." (Levering 183)

The eighth day – throughout the OT – was always the focal point of Israel's worship.

The Feast of Booths had sacred assemblies on the first day and the eighth day of the feast.

Passover was a 7-day feast – but the Passover cycle is completed 50 days later

(Pentecost is the day *after* the seventh Sabbath – $7 \times 7 = 49$, plus 1 – making 50 the ultimate "8th day").

The Gospel of John highlights this by focusing the resurrection appearances of Jesus on the first day of the week (20:1) and "eight days later" (20:26).

We are now gathered here on the 8th day – the first day of the new creation!

Because we come into the heavenly Holy of Holies – by the blood of Christ –

we hear the Word of the LORD –

we partake of the covenant meal –

we rejoice and are glad because God has brought us near to himself!

And as we draw near in faith,

we partake of that living water that flows from the pierced side of Jesus –
the living water that flows from the heavenly temple to the nations.

If you are weary and heavy laden –

believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

If you long for refreshment and peace,

believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!

You may say, "Pastor, I've been a Christian all my life,

but I just don't know that joy right now.

That's okay, just believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!

Believing in Jesus is not something that you do once, and never do again!

Believing in Jesus is something you have to do *every day*!

So don't think that just because you're a Christian,

therefore the call to faith is for someone else!

No, *all of us* need to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ – and you will be saved!