

**Let Us Arise and Build
Lessons from Nehemiah
Rebuilding God's People #2—Reinstating Divinely-Commanded Worship**

Intro: In our studies of Nehemiah we've seen how God's people joined together to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem; but the book of Nehemiah describes another great building project—rebuilding a people who knew and served the Lord. As we look at Nehemiah's efforts we see four important aspects of that spiritual rebuilding.

Reading the Law

Reinstating divinely-commanded worship

Confessing sin

Committing to personal holiness

Let's consider the second. The day after the great assembly in which all Israel gathered to hear the Law, the heads of households assembled to gain insight into the word of the Lord. Let's hear Nehemiah's description of this auspicious occasion.

“Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests, and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. And they found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches, and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.” 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. And the entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. And he read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.” (Nehemiah 8:13–18)

Reinstating divinely-commanded worship

Here we are able to see that the next step in rebuilding a spiritual wall around Jerusalem was reinstating divinely-commanded worship. It was important to read the Law to know God's will; but what good would that do if the law was not applied? Israel's leaders gathered to gain understanding as to what they be teaching their families.

Israel's worship was a response to the reading of the word of God, not an action originating from the opinions of men.

God's people knew that the Lord had a right to determine how He should be worshipped. He had commanded the festival of Booths in

the Law. Leviticus 23 lists the various feasts the Lord commanded Israel to observe and told them how they should be celebrated:

““Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘On the fifteenth of this seventh month is the Feast of Booths for seven days to the LORD.’” (Leviticus 23:34)

“‘Now on the first day you shall take for yourselves the foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.’” (Leviticus 23:40)

“‘You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths,’” (Leviticus 23:42)

The Lord himself had vouchsafed the practice of proper worship by the declaration of who it was who had declared it: *I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 23:*

What does this mean? When we appreciate who the Lord is and what He has done for us, there should be no inclination to do otherwise than what He has commanded.

Today people often determine how they will worship, not by reading the Scriptures and looking for what the Lord has commanded, but by what they in their own minds desire. Paul warned the Colossians of this tendency to substitute our own self-made religion for what God has commanded:

The Israelites acknowledged that the passing of many centuries did not nullify what the Lord had said in His word.

It is often contended that the passing of time calls for an updating of Scripture and its practices. In fact many modern teachers unapologetically contend that worship changes through the centuries.

But consider this! It had been approximately a thousand years since God had delivered these commanded, but they were just as relevant and applicable to the people of God in Nehemiah’s day as they had been in Moses’ day.

In fact the Lord had made it clear that His worship commands were to be practiced in perpetuity:

You shall thus celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. (Leviticus 23:41)

Likewise today we need to implement those worship commands that the Lord gave through His apostles and carry them out the way they did.

The Israelites obeyed the Lord’s command to the letter.

We are amazed here to learn that this command of God had aspects that apparently been neglected for a long time.

Clearly there were occasions earlier in Israel’s history when the Israelites observed the Feast of Booths; but apparently they had

neglected the aspect of building booths while celebrating the ingathering of the crops.

Past neglect did not justify their continuing neglect of a command of God. Nor, was there any attempt to alter what God had said. They had enough respect for the Lord not to change what he had said.

Note three aspects of Israel's response:

There was the intellectual response—they understood the message

There was the emotional response—they were disturbed by their neglect

There was the volitional response—they did something about their disobedience.

Later the Hebrew writer would apply that truth to us:

“FOR this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,” (Hebrews 2:1–3)

The Israelites obeyed when it would not have been convenient to do so.

It is hard to imagine how ridiculous the Israelites' practice might have looked to outsiders. They had already built secure comfortable houses to live in. They had protected the city by rebuilding the walls. Yet here they are living in crude huts built out of sticks.

Yet this simple act had an important purpose in God's mind:

“You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt. (Leviticus 23:42–43)

Convenience must always give way to conviction. It is not always convenient to do what the Lord says. It may require that we rearrange our schedule. We may miss some secular event we would like to be a part of. We may prefer to take some time off for leisure activities.

Obedience to the Lord brought them great joy.

For those who obey the Lord there is the removal of the guilt associated with neglect. There is the hope of the Lord's blessing upon them. So the Lord had urged the Israelites at the institution of the Feast of Booths:

You shall celebrate the Feast of Booths seven days after you have gathered in from your threshing floor and your wine vat ;and you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your towns. “Seven days you shall celebrate a feast to the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce

and in all the work of your hands, so that you shall be altogether joyful.” (Deuteronomy 16:13–15)

So today our worship should reflect the joy we have in the Lord and in the blessings He has provided for us. But I have to say that some of the worship assemblies I’ve been in through my preaching life were pretty lifeless and gloomy.

Their worship was accompanied by a sincere desire to do what the Lord commanded in their personal lives.

Earlier Isaiah had charged Israel with the tendency of ritualism. They went through the right motions, but without the inner conviction and desire to live for the Lord.

Later Jesus would appropriate Isaiah’s words to speak about his own generation:

You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. ‘BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN. (Matthew 15:7–9)

In our next lesson we’ll see how that the people’s attitudes in worship transferred to their personal lives in repentance and confession of sin.

Conclusion: We too need to have the same great attitude toward the word of God. In a day when people feel free to change worship to their liking, to attend when they find it convenient, it is refreshing to see those whose commitment to God causes them to attend the services regularly and to engage in those activities authorized by the word of God; and to do so with joy.