

# Finding Joy in the Book



## Nehemiah 8

The wall was completed (*Nehemiah 6:15*), and other than those who stayed in Jerusalem to populate the city (*7:4, 11:1*), the people had gone home to their own towns (*7:73*). Chapter 8 then describes how they gathered in the city at the Water Gate, where Ezra the priest and teacher read to them the Book of the Law of Moses.<sup>1</sup>

### Reading and Respecting

- Read Nehemiah 8:1-4. Ezra brought out the "Book" and read aloud to the men, the women, and all others who were able to understand, just as Moses had commanded God's people to do many years earlier (*Deuteronomy 31:11-12*).
  1. Who asked that the Book be read (*v. 1*)? Why do you think that might be important enough to mention here?
  2. What do you think might have motivated the people to gather to listen to the Law? What might motivate people today to make the effort to gather and listen to the word of God proclaimed and taught?
- Read Nehemiah 8:5-8. When Ezra opened the Book, the people didn't listen casually. They stood up, they lifted their hands, they responded "Amen" "Amen", and they bowed and worshipped. They stood, listening and being taught, for about 6 hours!
  3. What beliefs or attitudes do you think are demonstrated by these actions of the people?

### Rejoicing After Weeping

- Read Nehemiah 8:9-12. The people were moved by what they heard, and they wept as they listened. But they were told not to grieve (be sad) by Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites, because the day was holy (set apart) to God (*verses 9, 10, 11*), and because "the joy of the Lord is [their] strength" (*verse 10*). Instead they were told to celebrate, to eat and drink, and to share with those who have nothing prepared to eat.
  4. What might have caused the people to weep as the Book was read? Have you ever had a similar reaction (even if not going as far as weeping) when reading or hearing God's word, and under what circumstances does this happen?

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra, who is described as a teacher ('scribe' in some translations) and priest, arrived in Jerusalem 13 years before Nehemiah arrived (*Ezra 7:7 v. Neh. 2:1*), as part of the rebuilding and reestablishment of the temple. The 'Book of the Law of Moses' likely was the first five books of the Bible, or the Pentateuch.

5. How would being told that "*the joy of the Lord is your strength*" be a comfort to the people and cause them to rejoice? How could being reminded of that truth be an encouragement to Christians in difficult circumstances today?<sup>2</sup>



**Reflect:** The process that the people went through in verses 9-12 is not unlike the process that someone goes through when they become a Christian (or a Christian who is "convicted" of sin in their life), and often is initiated by reading or listening to the Book. The process begins with grief upon recognizing God's righteousness and their own unrighteousness, then finding great joy in realizing what God has accomplished for them by sending Jesus to die for the forgiveness of their sins, and further wanting to share that joy with others by meeting spiritual and physical needs. Perhaps you, or someone you know has been through this process recently?

### Responding with Obedience and Joy

- Read Nehemiah 8:13-18. The next day, leaders of the families gather with Ezra and the teachers to study the Book, where they find that God's people are commanded to celebrate a festival in which they live in temporary shelters ("booths" in some translations) for seven days. They were to remember how God led his people out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness, protecting and providing for them himself (even without a wall), and into the land promised to them.

The people obeyed what was commanded in the Book. They gathered branches of various kinds to build shelters, and lived in them for seven days in a celebration characterized by "very great joy." Of course, Ezra read to them each day from the Book.

6. What do you think it is about obeying God's commands that brings such great joy to the people in Nehemiah's time? Is that also true for Christians today?

### Reflection/Application

- Have you yet become a Christian and found joy in God's word yourself, grieving over not measuring up to God's standard of righteousness, but receiving (through faith) and rejoicing over the free gift of eternal life through Jesus, who became "sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21)?
- If you already are a Christian, do you listen to (or read) God's word regularly, allowing it to cause grief where needed, provide joy in obedience, and compel you to share Christ's love with those in need (both physically and spiritually)?

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the 'joy of the Lord' is found in understanding who God is (his character and attributes), what he expects (his standard of righteousness), and what he has accomplished for his people. Their 'strength' would be found in the realization that this is their God, about whom Paul claimed in Romans 8:31 'If God is for us, who can be against us?'