

## NEHEMIAH'S JOY ... he leads his people from SADNESS to GLADNESS (Neh. 8:7-19)

The Book of Nehemiah is best known for the fantastic project of rebuilding the city wall. Despite the work being constantly opposed, the enemy was forced to acknowledge the success of God's people. Neither Sanballat from the north, nor Tobiah from the east, nor Geshem from the south, nor the Philistines from the west, - none of them could halt God's programme.

It had been prophesied over 160 years earlier when Jehoiakim was King of Judah, prior to Nebuchadnezzar's invasions of Jerusalem. In 606 BC God said through Jeremiah, **Jer. 25:3** I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking; but ye have not hearkened. **4** And the LORD hath sent unto you all his servants the prophets, rising early and sending them; but ye have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear. **5** They said, Turn ye again now every one from his evil way, and from the evil of your doings, and dwell in the land that the LORD hath given unto you and to your fathers for ever and ever: **6** And go not after other gods to serve them, and to worship them, and provoke me not to anger with the works of your hands; and I will do you no hurt. **7** Yet ye have not hearkened unto me, saith the LORD; that ye might provoke me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt. **8** Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Because ye have not heard my words, **9** Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the LORD, and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations. **10** Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle. **11** And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ... And that is what the Lord did, - He exiled them to a foreign nation. He would keep them intact though, for He also promised hope, **Jer. 29:10** That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. (cf. Dan. 9:2). ... And when God *did* return His people to Jerusalem, the temple of Zerubbabel replaced Solomon's temple, the wall was made strong again, and God's Word began to be read in the city. God's plan for His people continued as He had promised, despite the enemy.

You might sometimes despair as to what is going on around us. Our nation has abandoned God. The world is in a state of panic. Godlessness is the order of the day. Unbelief is rife. Religion is polluted. ... But do not be under any illusion

for God is on the throne, and He repeats, **Jer. 29:11** I know the thoughts that I think toward you ... thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end [*hopeful future*]. ... He is not being *caught out*, instead, He has it *worked out*! ... **12** Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. **13** And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. There are the myriads of ‘Sanballats’, ‘Tobiahs’, ‘Geshems’, ‘Philistines’ and they all appear to be surrounding the people of God, but be assured His purpose will be fulfilled, **Is. 14:24** The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand ... **46:11** I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.

And as Ezra walked onto the specially-erected platform in the square beside the water gate, with the Law of Moses in his hands ... and he placed it on the podium ... and on his right-hand side six men joined him, and on the left-hand side was seven more. He then opened the book and all the people stood. ... He blessed the LORD, ‘the great God’, - giving Him all the glory for none of this would have happened but for Him ... And the voices of the whole congregation (v.2) bellowed out “Amen, Amen” ... their hands in the air, their heads bowed, their faces to the ground, and they were worshipping the Lord (Neh. 8:5,6).

They had risen early that morning and were listening as the word was read until midday when the sun was at its highest. ... This was the Law of Moses God gave to His people one thousand years earlier in the wilderness. It had lost none of its power and truth, as Ezra began reading, **Gen. 1:1** In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth ... and he went on to read about Adam and Eve, and Noah, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers ... and about Egypt and how the Hebrews settled there. He read about Moses, and the wilderness wanderings, and Joshua, and how God brought them through Jericho into the Promised Land. He read the genealogies. The people standing at the water gate were enthralled. ... They were in raptures, **Dt. 7:6** the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth ... and He promised He would keep the oath which he had sworn to their fathers (v.8).

And this was being read in the seventh month (8:2), the same month the Day of Atonement was celebrated ... but there is no mention of it. Had it been allowed to ‘fall by the wayside’? Had it been overtaken by events more pressing? ... Surely there were at least *some*, - even a few, - who celebrated it, but generally, it seems as if it was not observed as it should have been. Their adherence to

God and His law had been on the wane until the beginning of this seventh month in 445 BC, when Ezra read from the Law and the Spirit descended.

Previously, they had been busy, probably too busy to attend to the things of God ... They were so engrossed in building the wall and hanging the gates, they had forgotten! ... But when Ezra read from the Law, it captured their hearts, and the Holy Spirit opened their ears to listen and caused them to understand the reading (v.7,8). ... And when the people heard it, they wept, for **Rom. 3:20** by the law is the knowledge of sin. They could not hold back the tears of sorrow and repentance as they felt the awful load of their guilt.

And then Nehemiah, and Ezra, and the Levites instructed the people to stop weeping because this had become a special day (v.9) ... They could have stayed there until the evening, but Nehemiah sent them home (v.10). What a day it was for they had understood the words that were declared unto them (v.12). ... They had gathered expectantly, they had listened attentively, they had responded properly, and they went home joyfully.

The next day, the *men* returned (v.13) to be taught the word of God so they could bring it back to their families. And as they were reading through the Book of Leviticus, they were reminded of the Feast/Festival of Booths/Tabernacles, which commemorated the temporary dwelling-places of their ancestors in the wilderness. This eight-day Festival recalled God preserving the nation, **Lev. 23:39** in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the LORD seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. **40** And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. **41** And ye shall keep it a feast unto the LORD seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate *it in the seventh month*.

Previously, they had been building walls, now they were to build tents. ... Their enemies would have been totally confused! ... However, God was reminding His people how good He had been to them in former days, and He was also showing them how good He would continue to be. ... “But God, we are past all that, we are in Jerusalem now. We don’t need to be reminded of those old days.” ... Yes, you do, **42** Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: **43** *That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land*

*of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.* ... He was telling them what they had to remember ... and to submit to His Law, as in previous generations. ... And what God tells you to do, do it! ... For these eight days, *live in booths* ... and they did. ... Think how busy they have been. They had more work to do, but it did not matter for God's Word had their attention. *He* had the priority.

... And they went out and gathered up olive branches, and myrtle branches and palm tree branches, and any branches they could find ... and God's preference was to carry them up to the *roof* of their houses, build a temporary structure, and live there for eight days (v.16). ... They were to recall how good God was to their forefathers and they were to go 'back to the old paths' ... They were on the rooftops where the enemy could clearly see their witness and testimony to how they had proved God in the past and were trusting Him for the future. ... They went from mourning (v.9) to feasting, from sorrow to joy for there was very great gladness (v.17), as the Word of God gripped the people (v.18).

There is no substitute for returning to and reading God's Word for it is the power of God unto salvation. The preaching of His Word brings light to the darkened soul, confronting the sinner with their need to be saved, with the fact they will one day stand in judgment before the righteous God, and they need to turn to Christ for their salvation. It encourages the saint to keep trusting in the promises of God for this life and for eternity when we enter a greater Jerusalem where there are no more enemies, - no more death and dying, no more sorrow or crying, no more pain or suffering, no more unbelief and sin ... The walls of that glorious city are built with the most beautiful imperishable materials. Its gates are beyond description. Its garden has a clear-as-crystal river flowing through, with the most incredible vegetation and bloom on either side. And there is no darkness nor night there for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb shine in all their brilliance throughout this new Jerusalem ... And then John writes, **Rev. 22:3** and his servants shall serve him: **4** And they shall see his face ... **5** ... and they shall reign for ever and ever.

Nehemiah described the joy at the end of chapter eight as 'very great gladness', - from sadness to gladness ... On an infinitesimally grander scale, that's how Heaven will be! I trust you are holding on to His promises, and they are burning within your soul,

Oh, if there's only one song I can sing,  
When in His beauty I see the great King,  
This shall my song in eternity be,  
'Oh, what a wonder that Jesus loves me'!