

Spiritual progress can only be made when obedience to God's will is a priority. That is so, even in times of danger and difficulty. There can be no lasting joy without obedience. Whatever the drivers are that bring us to hear this word --- pain, sorrow, sickness, despair, seeking the joy of the Lord begins with obeying the Word of the Lord.

HEARING THE WORD WITH UNDERSTANDING [8:1-8]

[i] The Place [8:1]

Fifth Century BC Israel returned exiles met in an open space in Jerusalem. A square, plaza or piazza perhaps down by the water gate on the East of the city. [8:3] As when the first exiles returned to the city a "platform [tower] of wood was made for the purpose" [8:4] and "Ezra [the scribe] stood where people could see". [8:5] Basic provision was made for a place where effective teaching could occur.

[ii] The Purpose

Ezra the scribe would read the Law given in the days of Moses to remind the exiles of their responsibility to return to basic beliefs approved by God. This was a day of reformation giving every believer opportunity to re-affirm the truth.

[iii] The Preacher

Ezra humbly waited for the call from God' people to come and preach to them. [Ezra 9:3ff; 10:1,6] There is no point in talking if people are not willing to listen! The level of fear had been reducing as the walls neared completion. People were feeling more secure. [7:73b] They met on "the first day of the seventh month" [8:2], that is a few days after the completion of the wall. [6:15] There is no place in such an assembly for the "mindless superstition so characteristic of Godless religion. Understanding is the purpose of preaching. "Ezra brought the Law before all who could understand." [8:2] The reading continued from "early morning [when it was light] until midday." [8:3] Perhaps the 13 elders [8:4] shared the reading. Levites moved among the people, not to collect cash or exert crowd control as they might in western culture and places influenced by it today, but to "cause understanding" among the people. [8:7] The Spirit of God alone can apply the Word of God and produce an appropriate response, by the teachers of that Word must see that it is presented "distinctly....to give the sense and cause understanding".

[iv] The People

It is not evident that the crowd stood all morning, but initially they did when Ezra "opened the Law [God's Word]" [8:6, 7b] and they "listened attentively." [8:3] When Ezra praised {blessed} "the Lord, the great God" his hearers "answered 'Amen, Amen.'" [8:6] In meaningful spontaneity the servants of the Lord responded to the God whom they knew. "They bowed and worshipped facing down." [8:9b] Overcome, they "wept as they listened." Hearing the Word with understanding is a marvellous experience for the people of God.

HALLOWING LIFE WITH JOY [8:9-12]

While it is right to be overwhelmed by the majesty and promise of the Word of God, such sentiment needs to be transformed into lifestyle. "This day is hallowed [holy] to the Lord." It is not for weeping ultimately, but for joy. [8:9] A threefold response is called for.

Celebrate with choice food [not the usual bland animal fat] and sweet drink which will endow the memory with the capacity to bring this day to mind for a long time to come. [8:10; Leviticus 3:17]

Share with others who have nothing [5:14-19] in the way that Nehemiah was known for the number of people who shared his table? How many have shared your table lately? Sharing helps to show that "the joy of the Lord is your strength", and joy is the outworking of obedience. Giving and sharing are better than 'getting away' or being rich.

Stop the usual activities of business and pleasure. When I was converted there were ten commandments. Now there seem to be only nine! A day set apart to renew fellowship with God at least once each week has passed away for many Christians. Our God is the Creator and sustainer who says, "Be still and know that I am God" [8:11; Psalm 46:10]. Take time to understand the will of the Lord for your life. Joy depends on obedience and obedience on understanding. "The people went to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words preached to them." [8:12]

HEEDING THE LAW WITH DILIGENCE [8:13-18]

The first day was an assembly of all the people. On the "second day of the month" the leaders gathered with Ezra; heads of families, priests and levites. [8:13] The purpose was not to enjoy a talk fest, but "to give attention to the Law"; a vital priority under the Old Covenant. Two discoveries were made.

[i] Israelites were to live in booths [huts] during the feast of the seventh month. [8:14; Leviticus 23:39-43] This Feast of tabernacles [booths] had been kept since the entry into the promised land after the first exodus under Moses. [8:17] It coincided with the grape harvest [Exodus 34:32] and was meant to be a reminder of the wilderness experience which preceded settlement in the land. [Leviticus 23:43] The requirement to live in temporary shelters [booths] during the festival had been neglected and now needed to be reintroduced.

[ii] Elders were required to proclaim the feast and appeal for tree branches for the booths in the villages and Jerusalem. [8:15] The call to obedience marked the pathway to joy.

Over the two weeks until the feast on the fifteenth of the month booths were built. [8:16] Imagine the excitement as people laboured and children ran and played as booths took shape on rooftops, in courtyards [at home and in the temple] and in open spaces "by the water gate and the Gate of Ephraim." All returned exiles gratefully built booths and lived in them in a city wide camp out. The process was practical rather than decorative, unlike the Christian festival of Christmas as it is practised in Australia and other godless western nations.

There had not been a celebration quite like this since the early days of settlement in the land 700 years before. The newly restored permanence of Jerusalem was overlaid with the impermanence of pilgrims huts; a reminder of Israel's origins as pilgrims and exiles saved by grace, and a pointer to the future hope of those moving ahead with their Lord. "There was great gladness" when the truth was revealed and acted upon by faith. [8:17] This is the joy of simple obedience, such as can be found in any genuine church of the New Covenant. The summer school of joy continued for seven days with daily Bible readings by Ezra [8:18]; much in the way of Keswick Conventions in England and Katoomba Conventions and CMS Summer Schools occur in Australia each year.

The pattern revealed here is...

[a] Understanding discovered in pursuing the question, What is the Lord asking of me?

[b] Holiness evident in those determined to do what the Lord asks of them.

[c] Joy issuing from simple obedience to the revealed will of God

A man whispered, "God, speak to me" and a bird sang.

But, the man did not hear.

The man yelled "God, speak to me", and thunder rolled across the sky. The man did not listen. He looked around and said, "God let me see you". In the night sky thousands of stars shone brightly, but the man did not see. The man shouted, "God show me a miracle", and a baby was born. The man did not notice. He cried out in despair, "Touch me God, and let me know you are here", and God reached down and touched the man. The man brushed the beautiful butterfly away and walked on. He cried "God, I need your help", and an e-mail arrived with good news and encouragement, but the man deleted it and continued crying. We live in God's world, not ours. He acts according to his perfect will, not ours. Don't miss out on the joy of the Lord because it is not packaged the way they want it. Hear the Word that he speaks; a;; 66 books of it. Believe in the only Saviour he has given us, and enter into the joy of your Lord.