

Nehemiah Chapters 7-8 John Karmelich

1. When I started teaching Nehemiah a few weeks back, the first thing I pondered is, why is there a whole book in effect dedicated to building a wall around Jerusalem? Of course, I understand it is the city God choose to be His "World Headquarters". Yes I understand that we should care about the things that God cares about and if Jerusalem is His city, we should care about it's safety and if it's protected or not. Still, if you know you're history, that wall has come down at least once after it was built, so what's the big deal and why should we care? The answer is about "protection". It is the idea that just as God protects us in the sense He wants to use our lives for His glory so He's protecting our ability to do as long as it's His desire, so the wall symbolizes God protecting us as we again so we can use our lives to glorify Him.
 - a) OK John, that's old news. So what? Pause to consider that Nehemiah has 13 chapters. We have only studied six so far, so we're about half way through the book. If Nehemiah wrote this book to describe construction of the city walls, and problems associated with building it, why is there seven more chapters? What's the purpose of the rest of the book? So glad you asked! The word picture of this book is about believers gathered in a safe place as to seek Him, grow in His love as we use our lives to glorify Him. Now that the wall is done, it's time to seek God within His walls and that's what the rest of the book focuses upon.
 - b) So as we start the "second half" of the book, why's it here? What's even stranger is Chapter Seven is essentially a repeat of Ezra Chapter 2. It's mostly a list of the Israelites who came to that country roughly sixty years earlier. OK John, what gives and why should I care?
 - c) The list is here as Nehemiah wanted to organize God's chosen as we can worship God as a single group. In other words, the first thing he needed was a "roll call". The only list "roll call" list Nehemiah had is this sixty-year old one. Obviously many of them have died. The list is of family names of Jewish people there in the land. It gave an idea where all of them settled down (what town), what are their spiritual gifts (gate keepers, singers, etc). If they are going to worship God, it has to be organized. That simply means we're to use the gifts God gave each of us to glorify Him.
 - d) Nehemiah also realized now that the wall was finished, there was a lot of empty space left in Jerusalem. So since it is God's intention for people to gather there to worship Him, I'm suspecting this organization effort, might be to encourage people to move into Jerusalem, especially now that the walls were finished and it's a "real city again". The reason this list is included in the bible essentially so we know what was Nehemiah's starting point to get some Israelites to move back to Jerusalem. The application for us Christians is if we want people to work together to make a difference for Jesus, obviously some people need to be in the same building or neighborhood to accomplish that mission! I know it's redundant to list all those names again here in Nehemiah but it serves a purpose of saying, here are the chosen by God, let's work with this list to get some to draw even closer to Him.
2. All of that leads to Chapter 8. I'll just say that Ezra makes a "Guest appearance" here in this book. Yes we just had Ezra's "name list" that covered a long Chapter 7. Ezra himself was a priest who is alive at the same time as Nehemiah. Ezra was a priest who can trace his roots back to Aaron. No, he isn't a high priest, but still he's a well-trained priest. Chapter 8 in effect is a handful of studies of God's word and the application thereof. Nehemiah figured in effect, "since everyone's in town for this wall project, why don't we have a big "group study" of God's word and see what it says?
 - a) Keep in mind the Israelites probably didn't have "Sunday school" in those days and there were few Israelites who understood God's word. Anyway, a big reading of His word got organized and Ezra led it. The text said he had a bunch of people work with him to give the people help to understand it. In other words Ezra read for a bit, then everyone broke into groups to discuss it further with the hope that people would grasp what it is that was being said. There may have been language barrier issues here as well.

- b) The gathering also ties to the fact it was a Jewish new year. That is a complicated topic. I would say the short version is the calculations are based on a spring new year (with a new moon to calculate the months), but a fall new year as the actual new-year celebration. This is more complicated as a month is added every now and then to get to "365 days". All I'm getting at is there was a big gathering in Jerusalem on "New Year's". The occasion was for the reading of God's word. The reason it is mentioned is the wall got finished just before that New Year began. Nehemiah figured, "Hey it's a new year, we got a new city in effect, let's have an "Israel wide" bible study to honor God with the new year and see what He is desiring of us as His people.
 - c) God's word does, what God's word does: Convict of us our guilt of our sins before Him.
 - i) The reading of His word lead to a lot of conviction among the Israelites there.
 - ii) That led to another bible study of the leaders. They discovered that God required a feast day in the 7th month of the year, which was when they were meeting. They realized they're to gather not only for this fall "New Years", but also for a purpose that hasn't been celebrated in a long time. Let me explain further:
 - iii) Every fall to this day, there is a holiday among religious Jewish people. In English it's called "The feast of booths". The purpose is essentially to remember how they had to wander through the desert for forty years. God wanted them to remember that event, so everyone lived in a booth essentially for a week. Even today, you'll find Jewish booths made on rooftops and in open squares for this holiday!
 - iv) Why? The idea is to remember how God is preserving us as a nation. So why is it Christians don't do this holiday? My guess is because we're already preserved as a body of believers to worship Him. Anyway, Chapter 8 describes that festival of booths that apparently was the first nationwide one since Joshua first lead them to the Promised Land, so it was a big deal!
 - d) So besides live in booths for about a week, what else did they do?
 - i) Realize it was a time of celebration. The Israelites were already feeling convicted. I stated earlier they heard the reading of the Word on "New Years", and realized it was one big "screw up" since the days they first got into the land. So if that's true, why celebrate now? It not only symbolizes God's protection when He could have wiped them out, but also His forgiveness. The fact the Israelites were staring over as a people (remember they got to return to that land), so the feast of booths was a time of celebration. Even the pro-Roman Jewish historian who wrote about Rome conquering Israel as well as their history (Josephus) said "booths" was the happiest of all the Jewish holidays.
 - e) Bottom line, the work is done, the bible is studied, people are forgiven, it's a time to party!
3. OK John, good for them. They don't know the problems I'm dealing with. Why should I feel any joy just because God required them to live in booths a week out of the year? It's because God did make us for the purpose of having an intimate relationship with Him. He wants to forgive us. He wants us to study His word and draw close to Him. He wants us to trust Him for guidance as we go through our lives. Christian living is not about misery! It's about being full of joy as we'll have eternal joy. It's about accepting His full payment for our sins so we can use our lives to make the type of difference for Him that He desires. Yes, our problems are real. The longest they will last is one lifetime. Eternal forgiveness is about having joy in spite of all of that!
- a) With all that said, these two chapters are about who's to gather, because we've been called to make a difference for Him. Then we study His word to learn how God expects to live. That leads to a time of celebration as we're forgiven, and we can be full of joy, despite the things we're dealing with so we can use our lives for His glory. So what should I call this lesson? "Understanding The Big Picture". It's to understand the reasons we're separated, we're forgiven and we should be joyful. On that happy note, it's time to begin.

4. Chapter 7, Verse 1: After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed. ² I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do. ³ I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."
- a) As I stated in the introduction, the first thing to grasp here is the wall project is done. That of course, leads to my favorite question, "Now what"? The short version is these chapters deal with using Jerusalem as God intended to be used, as a place to gather His people for a purpose of honoring Him as God and having joy as believers. To get there first there has to be some organization effort. In other words, "who's going to do what, and who is there to worship God?" That's Chapter 7 in a sentence or two.
 - b) One of the things I've always been fascinated by is the question, "Why Jerusalem"? There are no great natural resources. There's no river there or access to a sea. There are no great mineral deposits. The one positive aspect is it's up on a hill so it's hard to conquer. That's why David picked it as his capital. I'd argue the reason why God picked it as the place He will rule from one day (Jesus Second Coming) is partially because in effect there's nothing special about it. God picked it, because God did and we must accept He's in charge. I am bringing all this up here, because we're going to read of a mixture of guarding that city as well Israelites gathering there to worship Him.
 - c) All of that leads back to Verse 1. It says after the doors were put in place, Nehemiah set up gatekeepers, singers and Levites. I don't know about you, but I don't think the singers are there to praise the gates. The issue has to do with setting up Jerusalem for what it's meant to be a place to worship God. The Levites were one of the 12 tribes and their job was to be the priests to the rest of the Israelites. To tell once again one of my favorite jokes, "If you're a young Israelite (back then) and wanted to be a camel trader, but you were from the tribe of Levi, your father would say, "Sorry son, off to seminary you go". If you wanted to be a priest but did come from a different tribe, dad would say, "Sorry son, you're coming in the family sheep business or whatever they did". My point is Nehemiah wasn't just concerned with the walls of the city, but finding people who'd be part of Israelite worship service for the Israelites as they visited or lived in Jerusalem.
 - d) Verse 2 is the "practical" aspects of running a city. It mentions Nehemiah's brother along with a man named Hananiah who were civil leaders there. Keep in mind this book is also a great model of leadership. Nehemiah picks God-fearing men to be in charge of the civil aspects of life. I suspect Nehemiah found out about people's spiritual gifts (as well as the background of them) and gave them appropriate jobs. Also keep in mind that gatekeepers are much more than those who lock up at night. Their job was to watch who comes in and out. Think of it as being in the security profession.
 - e) Speaking of security, that leads to Verse 3. He's making a big deal about the gates they've just built and installed be kept locked at night and open only in daylight hours? I assume there's a reason for that. I suspect part of it was Nehemiah's fears of further attacks by an enemy of Israel. After all, the purpose of a walled city is to protect those living inside the walls of that place. Remember that Nehemiah also appointed people to watch those who entered and left the city gates. Therefore he's saying in effect, let's do what's safe and only in daylight hours will the gates be open. One of the last things the bible states in the final chapter is the fact there will be "no more night" there. I'm guessing that means a need for sleep won't be needed in heaven and the light of God will always shine. Anyway until it happens, we must still protect what is ours and what is God's, thus the security measure.
 - f) The final thing mentioned here is that some the guards are to work near their houses. I'd suspect it's simply saying let people work near where they live if they desire to do so.

5. Verse 4: Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. ⁵ So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there:
 - a) One of the questions I had to research was "how big was Jerusalem". The best answer that I could find was it's about nine square acres. For those who want a visual, an acre is about the size of a football or soccer field. We'll read later in this chapter, that about 50,000 men returned to Israel when the first count was made about sixty years earlier. So if Jerusalem is nine square acres and an acre is 43,560 sq.ft. (my appraiser education there!) that means it was about 390,000 square feet in size. I recall reading a study by the U.S. Army Engineer Corp's of Engineers that said to build a refugee camp one needs 40 sq.ft. per person. All I am saying is 50,000 times 40 square feet is 2,000,000 square feet. That means that all of those who returned from the Babylonian captivity could easily fit in Jerusalem. As we'll read in this chapter, those refugees lived all over that area and not just in the area.
 - b) For my math challenged readers, all this means is that the city of Jerusalem at the time the wall was finished had room for lots more people than currently lived there. The reason it is such a big deal to Nehemiah is that if Jerusalem was "God's chosen city" he wanted it to be filled with Israelites to work the temple, live there and host the Israelites when they're gathered in that city for annual festivals.
 - c) All of this is going to lead to what I call the boring part of this lesson. Going through all of names of people who returned to Israel when they first got there about 60 years ago. As I stated in the introduction, if Nehemiah as the leader wanted to organize who will be there in that land to govern over, he needed to start with a list "somewhere". The only list of the names of Israelites he had was probably the one Ezra had in his book. So why repeat it in Nehemiah? I suspect it's to show what Nehemiah had to work with. Yes, I'll repeat a few of the comments I made on Ezra 2 here, but I'll get through it as quick as I can. Let's go:
6. Verse 6: These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town, ⁷ in company with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum and Baanah):
 - a) From Verses 7 all the way to 63, is a list of names of people who traveled to Israel roughly 60 years earlier when the Persian Emperor allowed the Israelites to return there. I'll try to get through these names as fast as possible. Notice among the names is Nehemiah. It can not be the same as this book as it's 60 years earlier. Anyway, these 14 names were the ones who lead the original caravan back to Israel.
 - b) With that said, here we go:
7. Verse 7 (Cont.): The list of the men of Israel: ⁸ the descendants of Parosh 2,172 ⁹ of Shephatiah 372 ¹⁰ of Arah 652 ¹¹ of Pahath-Moab (through the line of Jeshua and Joab) 2,818 ¹² of Elam 1,254 ¹³ of Zattu 845 of Zaccai 760 ¹⁵ of Binnui 648 ¹⁶ of Bebai 628 ¹⁷ of Azgad 2,322 ¹⁸ of Adonikam 667 ¹⁹ of Bigvai 2,067 ²⁰ of Adin 655 ²¹ of Ater (through Hezekiah) 98 ²² of Hashum 328 ²³ of Bezai 324 ²⁴ of Hariph 112 ²⁵ of Gibeon 95 ²⁶ the men of Bethlehem and Netophah 188 ²⁷ of Anathoth 128 ²⁸ of Beth Azmaveth 42 ²⁹ of Kiriath Jearim, Kephirah and Beeroth 743 ³⁰ of Ramah and Geba 621 ³¹ of Micmash 122 ³² of Bethel and Ai 123 ³³ of the other Nebo 52 ³⁴ of the other Elam 1,254 ³⁵ of Harim 320 ³⁶ of Jericho 345 ³⁷ of Lod, Hadid and Ono 721 ³⁸ of Senaah 3,930
 - a) Half way through all those names in one short paragraph! Realize that these are lists of descendants. In Jewish thought, a child isn't just a child, he's next in a continuing line of descendants. My point is when you read that Parosh (whoever that was) had 2,172 that came to Israel, think of it as the start of a line of people and 2,172 of his descendants did make the trip back to Israel.
 - b) I have to admit, I've spent time pondering this process. Did for example, over 2,000 just show up at a town and say, "our ancestors lived here, everybody else must leave"?

- i) Did they have to share land with people who've lived there since? I know a lot of Israel was abandoned and many of these families literally had to rebuild what was torn down roughly 70 years earlier. Also keep in mind Nehemiah's list is about 60 years old at this point. So these family lines got "plugged in" in Israelite towns all around that area Nehemiah would now know where to find everyone.
 - ii) Remember why Nehemiah is going through all of this. He realized that God wants all the Israelites to come to feasts in Jerusalem three times a year. In order to figure out who should be there, Nehemiah had to start "somewhere", and I suspect all he had was this sixty-year-old list.
 - iii) OK enough details. Let's get through this list of names!
- 8. Verse 39: The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah (through the family of Jeshua) 973 ⁴⁰ of Immer 1,052 ⁴¹ of Pashhur 1,247 ⁴² of Harim 1,017 ⁴³ The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua (through Kadmiel through the line of Hodaviah) 74 ⁴⁴ The singers: the descendants of Asaph 148 ⁴⁵ The gatekeepers: the descendants of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita and Shobai 138 ⁴⁶ The temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth, ⁴⁷ Keros, Sia, Padon, ⁴⁸ Lebana, Hagaba, Shalmi, ⁴⁹ Hanan, Giddel, Gahar, ⁵⁰ Reaiah, Rezin, Nekoda, ⁵¹ Gazzam, Uzza, Paseah, ⁵² Besai, Meunim, Nephussim, ⁵³ Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur, ⁵⁴ Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha, ⁵⁵ Barkos, Sisera, Temah, ⁵⁶ Nezia and Hatipha ⁵⁷ The descendants of the servants of Solomon: the descendants of Sotai, Sophereth, Perida, ⁵⁸ Jaala, Darkon, Giddel, ⁵⁹ Shephatiah, Hattil, Pokereth-Hazzebaim and Amon ⁶⁰ The temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon 392
 - a) The only significant change of the second part of this list is it ties to people who are on the "front lines" so to speak. We have those who are priests, those who assist the priests (those from the tribe of Levi), those who have gifts as singers, those who work the gates. I'm not sure all of them were living in Jerusalem. It's simply the fact that among all those who did return to Israel a lot of them were trained to "do God's work" so to speak.
 - b) A lot of commentators make the point that this chapter is not exactly the same as Ezra 2. I suspect it may be as simple as corrections or maybe those who didn't survive the long trip from the Persian Empire back to Israel. It's trivial, but there are a few minor differences.
 - c) I'm not one of those people who argue that we need to memorize all these names. I'm just saying God cares about people and these are the people who made that long journey.
- 9. Verse 61: The following came up from the towns of Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Kerub, Addon and Immer, but they could not show that their families were descended from Israel: ⁶²the descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah and Nekoda 642 ⁶³ And from among the priests: the descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (a man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name). ⁶⁴ These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. ⁶⁵ The governor, therefore, ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.
 - a) The good news is that's it for the list of names. This is among one of the toughest parts of the bible to get through (along with the first dozen chapters of 1st Chronicles). Every now and then the bible likes to give long lists of names that we'll probably forget soon after we read them. There here to say in effect that God cares about His people and here's a list of the people who decided to get close to Him.
 - b) This final group of people had an interesting "problem". They could not find out where is their family background, so they were temporary "excluded" until a priest was consulted.
 - i) It doesn't mean these people starved or couldn't be among the Israelites. It means that when it came to "official gatherings", they were not counted "unit".
 - ii) For those who don't know, what the Urim and Thummim is, is not known. I think it was simply two dice like objects. It would be like if we kept rolling them and it came up "snake eyes" every time, it means "God is controlling the dice" in a sense.

- c) So does this mean people who couldn't prove their heritage couldn't worship God? No it's not like that. It's more about proving "Israelites were Israelites". In a sense, it did become a "moot point" because when the Romans destroyed the temple, the family records did get burned at that point in history about 500 years after this. Still at this time, knowing family records could prove who the Messiah was when He came as He was a descendant of King David. So family records were necessary for that reason alone, let alone proving who was called into the priesthood.
 - d) Time to summarize all of this:
10. Verse 66: The whole company numbered 42,360, ⁶⁷ besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants; and they also had 245 men and women singers. ⁶⁸ There were 736 horses, 245 mules, ⁶⁹ 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys.
 - a) Remember how I said there is about nine acres inside of Jerusalem? I also said that an acre is 43,560 sq.ft. So figure there is roughly 9 square feet of land for each person. I do realize that this list of names is 60 years old and I realize these are people living all over Israel. It is just away to remember how many people are on that list. If this is way too much math, just remember there were about 50,000 names of people who came back.
 - b) So why list the animals? I suspect it was simply part of the original list that Nehemiah is copying from Ezra's records. It could also show what they "had to work with" as they are starting the rebuilding project.
 - c) The good news is we made it through one of the most boring parts of the bible. The rest of this lesson is much more interesting and has some wonderful lessons to apply. First we'll get a few more facts about what the Israelites "had to work with" in their worship effort.
 11. Verse 70: Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 drachmas of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests. ⁷¹ Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasury for the work 20,000 drachmas of gold and 2,200 minas of silver. ⁷² The total given by the rest of the people was 20,000 drachmas of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and 67 garments for priests.
 - a) This list also included what the original group contributed financially to help the project. I am guessing it also included gifts from those who didn't make the trip.
 - b) I am well aware of people who write a check to church this week and think, "I'm good as I made my weekly donation. Now I can go do whatever I want". Most of us know pleasing God doesn't work that way. At the same time, there are also sincere people who really do want to financially contribute to make a difference for God. I'm sure we have an example of that here. That's my simple point.
 12. Verse 73: The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers and the temple servants, along with certain of the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns.
 - a) If nothing else, this final verse of the chapter shows that not everyone lived in Jerusalem. Even those who worked as priests, worked the gates, singers, etc. "commuted" elsewhere even though they didn't live in Jerusalem at that moment. We got 18 more verses that I'll cover in this lesson. Remember that the main purpose is Nehemiah not only desired that the city of Jerusalem be walled for protection, but that it was also used for God's glory. It is why he made that effort to locate all of God's people in the area.
 - b) Now that he's "found everyone". The next step is to help lead them closer to God. That is in effect what Chapter 18 is all about.
 13. Verse 73 cont.: When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, ¹ all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.
 - a) As I like to point out every now and then, the chapter and verse numbers were not placed there until roughly the time of the printing press. In this case, the last sentence of Chapter Seven transitions well into the first verse of Chapter 18. Let me explain:

- i) One of the things that fascinated me is the Jewish New Year's always celebrated on the first day of the fall month. Yet the book of Exodus (12:2) tells us the month that is associated with Passover (same time of year as Easter) is the first month. Today the Israelites celebrate New Years as the first day in the fall month. The Israelites did know that there was a normal gathering time in the fall which also happens to be right after the wall was finished. How that fall day become New Years is lost in time and is essentially a tradition. If you read the text, there's no mention that this is a New Years celebration, just a time for all the Israelites to gather in Jerusalem.
 - b) So besides the blowing of a Ram's horn (that's what God called for on this day), Nehemiah decided that there should be an Israelite wide "bible study". Since his buddy Ezra was the biggest expert he new on the bible, Ezra did the reading.
 - c) The text also mentions the "water gate". Maybe it was an area big enough for all Israelites to gather. If you see a map of Jerusalem at that time, it's about "5 pm" on a clock dial. I've also heard some interesting lectures as the New Testament likes to use "washing with the word (of God) as a metaphor. (See Ephesians 5:26). You can "run with it" if you want!
 - d) Anyway, Ezra owned bible scrolls. The text says he brought out the "Book of the Law of Moses" Some scholars think it refers to all five books associated with Moses, but most of the scholars will argue it just refers to Deuteronomy. Anyway, it's "bible study time" and Ezra is going to lead it for the Israelites as they gathered in one spot.
- 14. Verse 2: So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.
 - a) I get people who complain that these lessons are too long. Yet here is Ezra leading a bible study from dawn until noon! By the way, it's not like he stood there and read and read it. As the text will imply, he read for awhile, then people broke into small groups to grasp it better and ask questions. In effect we get "big church size" bible study and small groups style in this chapter.
 - b) I kept thinking about the practical aspects. We're children free to go and play? Was there a place for nursing mothers to go? I'm sure it was organized in a way where those people could hear. After all there were no microphones. Not everyone was literate, but most of them could understand what the bible says or else the others translated for them.
 - c) Keep in mind this is done on the first day of the fall month. That date eventually became "New Years" for Jewish people, but I'm beating a dead horse here.
 - d) Since I spent the better part of the last 20 years teaching the bible, I don't have to elaborate on how important this is to me. Let's continue:
- 15. Verse 4: Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.
 - a) Before we get into all the names here, why does the bible tell us a high platform was made for them to stand on? It may have been as simple as to indicate how this large of a crowd could hear him speak. It also gives credit to those who "set up the stage" as if to say God's aware of those who work behind the scenes as well as the bible speakers themselves. For those who do church set up and clean up work, it is appreciated. As the bible says, if you give a glass of water in God's name one will not lose their heavenly reward. (Matt.10:42.)
 - b) OK we know about Ezra, who are the rest of these guys? They're also priests who I figure worked to help explain what Ezra read. Again, it's not like Ezra read for six hour straight. I suspect he read for a bit, then groups broke out to comment on what was written. These other 13 men worked on interpretation and helped people to understand.

16. Verse 5: Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.
- a) These verses explain how this process started. We also see why the platform was built. It was so everyone could see Ezra preach. When Ezra started the reading process, he began by praising God and the crowd responded with an "Amen". For the few who don't know this the word "Amen" means "so be it" or "We agree with what was said". The point is the worship process of studying God's word with honoring Him as God and the author of the book we have been studying for thousands of years.
 - b) For what it's worth, I'm a big believer that the position we pray in isn't as important as the attitude we have when we pray. You can find references in the bible to people praying in all sorts of physical positions. With that understood the fact that the Israelites worshipped God with their faces to the ground is a way of saying "God's in charge and we're not"!
17. Verse 7: The Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah--instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.
- a) The names here are different than one in Verse 4. As I say way too often, "All priests are Levites, but not all Levites (one of the 12 Israelite tribes) are priests". The Levites that are not priests assisted them by doing other "priestly" functions for example, in service at the temple. Here we're reading of Levites helping people understand what the bible did say. In other words it wasn't just the guys on stage with Ezra who helped people get what the bible was saying. There were Levites scattered with the crowd, probably illustrating what the bible was saying and helping people to grasp it. In other words, those who comment on the bible are "biblical" so to speak!
 - b) Keep in mind the bible is much more than just saying, "Here's the Jesus story, believe it as He'll give you eternal life". Yes that story is scattered through the bible. At the same time, the bible is a guide to how God wants us to live as a witness for Him. As I also like to say, for issues the bible is silent about, we're free to live however we want. Anyway, Ezra did organize this huge bible study and worked it out in "bite size" pieces. He was also willing to let others share in the joy of that teaching.
18. Verse 9: Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.
- a) Here we get a verse with Nehemiah and Ezra mentioned the "same breath". Notice both of them were involved in the teaching process along with other Levites and scribes. If you're not aware a "scribe" is simply a person who knows the bible well.
 - b) The next thing we read is the audience reaction of this. The crowd mourned and weep as they heard the bible. Why was that? It's not about how long they had to stand or listen to this. The bible does what the bible does: convict us of our sins. Deuteronomy (the book of the law) list consequences of turning from God and they realized their collective guilt as a nation before God. The text made them think about their history when of being kicked out of that land in the first place! They probably thought about their intermarriages as well. It is a topic Nehemiah will mention later in this book. Plus we had the issue of the Israelite "loan sharks" (Chapter 5) to other Israelites. To state what most of us know, studying the bible does make us realize how short we fall before God. We know that, let's continue:
 - c) One thing that also fascinated me is the first month of the fall is known for three holidays. One is the "New Year's" one where they are being gathered. One is the "Feast of booths". We'll get to that feast in a matter of verses. Yet there is no mention of what is considered the most holy day, It is "Yom Kippur – Day of Atonement".

- i) Either this holiday was celebrated and not mentioned or what I suspect happened, because the Israelites were so convinced by their sins at this reading, their leaders figured, "You know what, that's enough conviction for one month! What we'll also read is the Israelites didn't observe the Feast of Booths as we'll read in a bit. All of this makes me wonder if the "Day of Atonement" was simply ignored. For those who don't know the Day of Atonement is a day for the Israelites to gather as they confess their sins before God. Obviously we don't know the reason why it is not mentioned in this text, just that it wasn't.
 - ii) Anyway what the text is teaching is that the bible convicts of us our sins.
 - d) Let me ask another question: Is it a requirement for a Christian to study their bible to be saved? No. However, the better we know it, the better we know how God wants us to be a witness for Him. I joke that the good news of knowing our bible is we can draw close to God by learning it. The bad news is we're accountable for what we know!
 - i) That leads to a related question: Why don't Christians celebrate these holidays? I would say there's nothing wrong with "checking them out". They're required for a religious Jewish person. If one studies the New Testament, non-Jewish Christians did not observe them. That's because Jesus is the fulfillment of the law for all who believe in Him. (See Matthew 5:17-20). Obviously there's nothing wrong with us confessing our sins or remembering the good things God has done for us. I believe the reason the church never pushed these holidays on non-Jewish believers is they saw them as they were, for the Jewish nation to observe. So what about those who are both Jewish and Christian? We can debate whether it's required but I'd argue it is a good thing to remember what God's done for their nation.
 - ii) Meanwhile we got eight more verses to cover.
19. Verse 10: Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."
- a) My very, very loose translation: "Hey guys, I get the idea you feel convicted by all of the sins you've committed individually and as a nation. However, a significant aspect to our believe in God is accepting the fact that He has forgiven us. After all, we're back here in the land even after our nation collectively turned our back on Him. We're gathered here in Jerusalem for the purpose of worshipping Him. Accept His forgiveness. Go enjoy life and have a good time!"
 - b) I have to admit one of the things that bothers me is Christians who never enjoy life. They say they're so busy working for God, they've got no time to enjoy the world God created! Sometimes I wonder when we get to heaven if God asks us, "Did you ever take the time to enjoy the world I created for you? Did you ever pause form work to just spend time with other believers (and have fun) and enjoy the good things this world has offer!"
 - c) One of the things I pray for daily is for God to give me endurance, patience and joy in life. Yes I have problems and issues I have to deal with. If I don't take the time to enjoy life, it'll pass right by me. I like to plan out a bucket list, even if I don't get to accomplish all of the things on that list. The important thing is God wants us to be full of joy as we use our life to make a difference for Him. That's why Nehemiah is preaching "joy" at this moment.
 - d) Notice the text doesn't say, "Don't eat unhealthy foods as it's bad for you". Yes there has to be balance in life. I'm just saying don't be so obsessed with what has to be done that we're not taking the time to enjoy life. It's a key point of Christianity as well as this lesson. Think about it logically, are we a good witness for Jesus if we're miserable? Of course not!
20. Verse 11: The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."
- a) Meanwhile the Israelites were so focused on their sins, the Levites had to encourage joy!

- b) In other words, the Levites are doing what I've been doing for the last half a page! It will lead to the good news of Verse 12:
21. Verse 12: Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.
- a) I don't know about you, but if someone tells me to go enjoy good food (we're not talking about plain vegetables here!) and have fun with other believers over good food, I promise not to argue but to comply with that order! You have to admit, of all the things the bible tells us to do, it's hard to say no to a fattening meal and having joy with other believers. I know there has to be balance, but as I just preached, if we don't take the time to enjoy the blessings God has provided for us, we've wasted a great part of our lives.
- b) Now notice the second half of the verse. They understand what the bible expects of them. As I stated earlier, when the bible is silent on an issue, we're free to make the best decision we can on an issue. If the bible commands us to be joyful no matter what, be joyful! If for no other reason, being joyful makes us a better witness for Jesus. Of course I understand there are moments of horrible pain. I'm not that naïve. Still to go through life without any sort of joy in our hearts is a waste of a life. OK, I've beaten that point to death. Let's move on from that. Time to discuss the "Feast of Booths", the other fall feast.
22. Verse 13: On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law.¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths"--as it is written.
- a) So what does one do after the bible study is all done? What do we do next? Verse 13 says there was another bible study on the second day. This time only the priests and "leaders" were there. I see it as Ezra and his gang convicted everyone of their sins yesterday. Then they said "OK everyone trusts God has forgiven us, let's trust in that fact and go celebrate. Verse 13 takes place the next day from that big bible study. It's saying in effect, "We said our thing to the big crowds yesterday. Today's a new day and we need to figure out what to do while everybody is still hanging out here in town! I would argue the lesson is about "When we're not sure what to do next, we seek God for a bit of guidance. Anyway, Ezra organized another bible study on "Day 2" for the leaders.
- b) Time to talk about the "Feast of Booths". It lasts eight days and it's in the same month as the "blowing of the trumpets feast" which became the New Year's celebration. If you do not know, all of this usually happens in October by our calendar. The feast begins on the 15th day of the month. Technically it's only for seven days, but there is also a celebration of it's ending on the 8th day. Keep in mind the Jewish calendar is always based on a lunar cycle. The first of the month is a new (no) moon. The 15th is when it's a full moon. So the Israelites always new when it began. By the way, the Jewish holiday of Passover, which is the day Jesus was crucified, is also on a full moon in the spring.
- c) The way this holiday is celebrated is "everyone" makes booths. They're not to be very well constructed. The idea is when one sleeps in them, one can feel the breeze blowing and see stars between the branches/leaves used for the roof covering. (By the way later in history rules were made where if it was raining, one didn't have to stay in them.) This was done for the Israelites to remember how their ancestors were in the desert for 40 years until the next generation entered the Promised Land. The idea is about remembering preservation of God's people. Just as God has keep that nation around as a nation after the Babylonians conquered them, so has and is continuing to preserve them as a nation. Living this way is a reminder of how God is preserving us through our life so we can be a witness for Him.

- d) So again, why don't Christians live in booths? Because non-Israelites didn't have to live in the desert for 40 years. Yes God is still preserving His people. If you're ever invited to one of those festivals or services, it's an interesting thing to check out!
 - e) Notice the obedience to God's word. They didn't just read, "God commanded us to do this and what does the next chapter say?" (By the way, it is in Leviticus 23:33-43 if interested). They finished that bible study and said, "Hey that's in two weeks, let's tell everyone to cut and pluck those tree and bush branches and get started on those booths." They did spread the word to people living all over Israel as again, this second bible study was only for the leaders to attend.
 - f) So why seven days and a holiday on the 8th day? Biblical speaking seven days is thought of as a complete time period (as in God made the world in six days and rested on the 7th. The idea of a holiday on the 8th day is a symbol of a "new beginning". By the way, if you take any of the names or titles of Jesus, the numerical value of those names in the original Greek is always divisible by eight in case you care!
 - g) I'm starting to get weird. Let's finish the lesson, we're almost there.
23. Verse 16: So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.
- a) If there is one thing God loves, it's obedience. Here we read the Israelites being obedient to the command to celebrate the holiday. That's why Verse 16 and 17 essentially state the cooperation of the Israelites to celebrate the holiday. Notice this holiday was celebrated in and around Jerusalem. I am guessing these two gates had large areas where many people can build booths.
 - b) Keep in mind the city walls were finished in Chapter 6. Here we are two chapters later, as we have the Israelites gathered within those walls probably mainly camped by two gates. There they are celebrating this holiday.
 - c) By the way, if you study the Old Testament there were a few times that this feast day was celebrated. When Verse 17 "there had not been a celebration like this", he's referring to the joyfulness that people had when this holiday was celebrated. I don't know about you, but I got off work for a week, and food was provided during that time, and assuming that the weather cooperated, I think it'd be a nice holiday to celebrate. If you didn't know the way it was paid for was the Israelites paid a "tax" that went to cover the festival costs.
 - d) As I said in the introduction, at the time of Jesus, this was considered the most joyful of all the Jewish holidays (according to the Jewish historian Josephus). My point is the joy that came from this occasion "stuck" and lasted for centuries until the Romans did destroy the city of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
 - e) OK, final verse:
24. Verse 18: Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.
- a) Here we get the actual celebration of that Feast of Booths as it's called in English. So what did they do besides sleep in bad booths? More bible study! After all, if it's going to be the gathering of believers, what else is there to do (when we're not eating, etc) but to do study God's word to find out more how He wants us to live. Anyway, that's that.
 - b) OK John, hold the happiness for a second. We get the idea that about 2,500 years ago, the Israelites finished the wall, held some bible studies and did what God's word said. We do not have to build booths in our backyards every October (unless we want to) how's any of this applicable to us Christians? So glad you asked.

- i) The issue for us isn't the specifics of this holiday. It's to be like these Israelites. As they heard God's word, they got convinced, confessed their sins and celebrated in a time of joy together. Yes God wants us to confess our sins. He also desires that we have the joy in us that He promised us as believers. Let me quote Jesus as read in the New English Standard Version, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." John 15:11. Bottom line, Jesus is promising us joy as believers. What if I don't feel very joyful right now? Stop for a moment to consider all the ways God has blessed our lives. If you're alive at the moment, you can always find something to be grateful for. The fact you're alive, have food to eat at the moment, etc. One can always find something. As I like to say, "We can't always control our circumstances, but we can always control what's our attitude at the moment."
 - ii) OK the lessons over, go be joyful and we'll talk again soon.
25. Heavenly Father, thank you for the joy You've given us. Thank You that not only have you saved us, but You've separated us to be a living witness for You to the world around us. May be realize the joy we have within us and express that joy as we use our lives for Your glory. May the Spirit guide as to how to be that witness for You and make it obvious to us what it is You desire of us as we live for Your glory. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen